

# INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure



# INFERNO!

**A** FEW ISSUES ago, I drew attention to a post on the Black Library forum in which the poster complained that he didn't have any ideas for his *Inferno!* proposal. We had another post on the forum recently which, if anything, has actually stirred up stronger emotions within me.

This particular writer was concerned that if he submitted a story to *Inferno!* that there was nothing to stop the Black Library from 'borrowing' his plot and giving it to another author to work up into a story. However, it wasn't that he'd bought our honesty into question that bothered me the most but rather what he went on to say in a later post. Please note: this has been edited to actually make it readable.

*I have actually created it so if BL does not want it, I can change the names and send it into Company X. or Company Y but I don't really want to do that much work.*

Where do I start with this? If it really is as simple as changing the names to make the story work in another fictional setting then don't bother sending it to us – it's not a Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000 story. What makes Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 fiction stand out from the pack

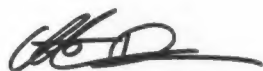
is that it is set in our own universes that have themes, locations and history that are unique to those settings; you can't just pick them up and transplant them into another continuity. Would the Gaunt's Ghosts series work if you picked it up and dropped it into the *Star Wars* universe for instance? No, because the stories wouldn't be underpinned by the Imperium's constant war against Chaos, the destruction of Tanieth by the forces of Chaos wouldn't carry as much emotional gravitas and some of the more subtle sub-plots, particularly those involving Soric and Milo, wouldn't make any sense.

This also applies to the Warhammer fantasy setting. Too many times have I had to read submissions where an elf, a dwarf and ogre team up to go and clear monsters out of a dungeon (is it just me or does that sound like a story from another fantasy setting entirely?). Instead, the Warhammer world is about the constant threat – from both within and without – of Chaos, the fragility of its inhabitants existence as orcs, skaven and undead encroach from all sides and the concept that even your allies are usually your enemy.

**Y**OU ONLY have to look at this issue of *Inferno!* for proof of the above. Would we have accepted *Wind of Change* if CL Werner's characterisation of his dark elves had them as subterranean dwelling sneaks? Would *Forever Loyal* have been passed for publication if Mitchel Scanlon hadn't grasped the importance and value of archaeotech in the 40K universe correctly? Would Ciaphas Cain work as a character if we didn't already have an established model for commissars? I think not.

Know your subject matter, love your subject matter if you have to, but above all be true to your subject matter. And that advice applies whether you're submitting to the Black Library, company X or company Y.

Of course, there is the other point of view that good stories are universal, regardless of whether they are set in Altdorf, a school for aspiring wizards or on the moon, but that's a topic for another editorial.



Christian Dunn  
Editor

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Write to us

Inferno! • The Black Library • Games Workshop Ltd • Willow Road • Lenton • Nottingham NG7 2WS • UK

Email us

[publishing@games-workshop.co.uk](mailto:publishing@games-workshop.co.uk)

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Marc Gascoigne

### EDITOR

Christian Dunn

### ASSISTANT EDITOR

Matt Ralphs

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Anthony Reynolds

Mitchel Scanlon

C L Werner

### ARTISTS

Dave Allsop

Simon Davis

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John Stokes

### ADMINISTRATION

Nozomi Goto

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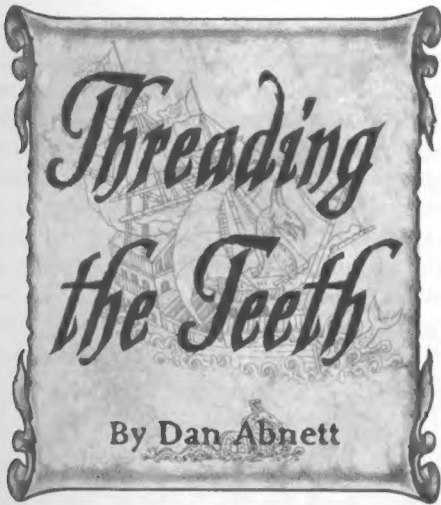
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### *A Fell Cargo Story*

THE SEA AIR was cool, and fair going they had made, but in the lea of the land the islands were heady and humid; jungle-draped cones that trilled with birdcalls and the ratchet of insects.

Round nameless rainforest atolls they meandered a snaking course. Luka Silvaro, master of the *Rievers*, knew every tideway and channel by heart, with no need of a chart or waggoner. The Southern Littoral of Estalia had been his particular hunting grounds of old. When he had been a pirate, not a privateer, that was.

'This is where the treasure ships would come,' he told Sesto, late one afternoon while they stood on the stern deck of the *Rumour*. The sky was turning coral red in the west, and seabirds chased and wheeled in their wake. Fahd had just cast a bucket of slops over the rail. 'They would be tired and breathless from the ocean crossing, like sprint horses run too hard, too long. Their bellies would be heavy. Lustrian gold, spices from Araby. Here, they had a choice. Sustain their sprint another eight days, running a straight line east all the way to Tilea, or rest and water in these southern islands.'

'What measure of good did that do them, if the likes of you were out hunting for their souls?' Sesto asked.

'Plenty,' replied the former pirate lord. If he'd sensed any rebuke in Sesto's remark, he made no sign of noticing it. 'In the early days, they would run straight. "Running the jaws", we called it. On the last of their

vittals and the last of their man-strength, they'd break backs for Luccini or Miragliano, hoping to give us the slip. That was the days of the big pirate ships, you understand. Sixty-pair guns, eight hundred tons. Sacadra the Jinx, Bonnie Berto, Banehanded Ezra. The pirate lords of legend. In open sea, a black flag could spy a treasure galleon from twenty seven miles, and vice versa. It was a game of chase and stamina, one the heavy treasure ships often lost, more as not.'

Luka Silvaro paused and toyed with the fat gold ring around his thumb. 'So the prey learned to come in close to the shore and work up into the islands.' He made no bones of the word 'prey.' It was quite matter of fact. 'In amongst the islands, they were harder to spot, and they had a chance to draw breath and reprovision after the arduously long crossing. Working their way through the islands - "threading the teeth", it was called - they could choose when and where to make their break into open sea. It improved their chances.'

He patted the polished rail of the *Rumour* affectionately. 'That's why, in this age, we prefer the slighter hunting ships. We have learned to stalk the islands, and spring upon the prey in lagoons and shallow bays while they are watering. It is a trick the corsairs have learned too. Their galleys could never catch a four master galleon fat-yarded in a blow.'

They were now nine days south-west of Porto Real, in amongst the last thickets of green islets before the bony reaches of the bare, dagger atolls that spiked out the end of Known Land and heralded, like a shattered archway, the great, dark oceans of the mysterious west. Sesto knew well the blood was up, the hunger for the hunt. It was like old times for Silvaro and the rogues who had shipped out with him before.

Three times they had put in at cove settlements along the island chain: a boucaners' enclave, a small Estalian port town and a sovereignless fishing village. In each one, the story had been the same. The Butcher Ship was close by. This was the heart of its hunting ground. Every few weeks or so, its great, black-hulled, dark-sheeted shape would sail into the little

harbours and train guns. Sometimes a warning cannonade would be fired. The locals, in fear of their lives, were forced to load up every ounce of provision and clean water they had to hand and row it out as ransom for their continued existence.

In the first part of the morning of the next day, Sesto heard voices arguing in Silvaro's cabin. There was no doubt the voices belonged to Silvaro himself and Roque, the master-at-arms. Sesto didn't dare approach. He sat down with his back to the base of the mainmast and waited. Ymgrawl, the ragged boucaner that Silvaro had set to watch over Sesto's welfare, sat down beside him. Long-limbed and scrawny, Ymgrawl folded himself up into a sitting position. He took out a tanner's knife with a hooked tip and began cutting away at a yellow-dry whale's tooth.

'They're arguing,' said Sesto at length.

'Aye.'

'Do they often argue?'

'Thou knowst as good as I. No better two friends on the seas.'

'Then what?'

Ymgrawl fixed Sesto with his narrow, flinty stare. 'The Butcher Ship. Roque can't credit this to be the truth. Too easy, saith he.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Butcher. 'Tis a monster. Like a force of creation. Roque saith it would not threat for supplies. It would as like raid and burn and take its will.'

'Then what is it we hunt?'

Ymgrawl shrugged.



**T**HE FREEPORT OF Salvar Bernadette was said to be the last living place in the island chain, though Ymgrawl boasted he knew of others. It was at least the last place of any real size. They came upon it in the heat of the afternoon. Across a bay twinkling with bright, reflected sunlight lay the inner curve of a dense, green island. Between sea and jungle sat a cluster of whitewashed buildings.

The bay was too shallow even for the *Safire*, so they cast out anchors at the mouth, and three armed boats were prepared and lowered. It was a long, sticky row to the shore. Sesto travelled in the lead boat with Luka, hearing the bare-chested ratings around him grunt and pant as they heaved to the stroke call. Sesto watched Luka prime and cock a pair of wheel-lock pistols and a short-muzzled caliver, and began to wish he'd brought a deal more than his rapier. Maybe his little Araby gun would have been a good idea.

They beached, and dragged the long-boats up onto the gritty sand. At Roque's gesture, men drew swords and pistols, and scurried forth up the head of the beach towards the stucco shacks and limed buildings that drowsed under the hem of date and palm.

'There's none here on it,' reported Fanciman, one of the arms men, returning to Roque. The master-at-arms had crouched down, touching a dark patch on the sand. He sniffed his fingers.

'Wet with lamp oil,' he said.

'What does that mean?' Sesto asked.

'Ware those huts!' Roque shouted, rising. The men up the beach, about to burst into some of the dwellings, paused.

Sesto hurried after Luka and Roque as they crossed to the nearest building. It was an old blockhouse, built of timber and mudbrick, its white plaster crumbling.

Luka pushed open the door with the snout of his caliver. The wood-planked door, gnawed away at the edges by sand and sea, creaked in a little way and stopped. Luka was about to nudge it again, when Roque raised a hand.

The Estalian crouched low to the side of the doorway and made the others stand back as he prodded the door the rest of the way in with his rapier's long blade.

The gunpowder boom scared birds out of the trees and its echo rolled up and down the warm air of the beach.

Inside the hut, a blunderbus had been set to a chair and its trigger tied with fishing twine to the door bolt.

'A trap,' said Roque, examining the makeshift weapon.

'A trap for what?' mused Silvaro.

Outside, a thin rattle of gunfire sounded.



They ran out of the hut. Bullet-balls and short-haft arrows were pelting down the beach from both the north and south ends, coming out of the trees. Already, three of Luka's landing party had fallen, wounded. There was a heavier boom from some field piece, and a geyser of sand vomitted up from the ground not ten paces from where Luka and Sesto stood.

'To arms! To arms!' Roque shouted.

Sesto heard a soft, clicking rush. Flames licked along the beach edge in a line, growing into a furiously burning wall. The oil Roque had scented was a fire-trap soaked into the ground. Someone had carefully – desperately, Sesto thought – prepared this welcome.

Another cannonball whizzled overhead and cracked wide the gables of the blockhouse they had entered.

'I've had my fill of this greeting,' Luka growled. 'Into cover!'

One of his men, obeying blindly, ran into a hut and was blown in two by the fowling piece strung to its door. Three more ran ill of a covered pit between two huts. The stretched, sand-covered canvas snapped away beneath their weight and plunged them into a staked darkness. Their howls were almost unbearable.

From the cover of the trees, dozens of men charged them, carrying spears, hatchets and machetes. Their skins were black, and white skull marks had been daubed on their faces. They howled and ululated, and beat on drums and copper kettles. Sesto thought them quite frightening. They had the pirate landers pinned on a narrow stretch of beach between the huts and the crackling wall of fire.

'Damn this!' roared Luka. He raised his caliver and fired it at the first who came running at him. The blast walloped the man over onto his back. Luka cast the caliver aside, and drew his pistols, greeting the next two assailants with similar fates.

Roque, his voice brooking no disobedience, brought the Riever party into a knot, forming two walls that faced each head of attack. A salvo of locks crackled and puffed white smoke, and skull-faced men dropped hard onto the sand.

Then blades came out and it came down to steel.

Luka, the largest man on the beach, was raging with temper now. He drew his curved shamshir and a stabbing dagger and hurled himself at the line of charging foemen.

'With him! With him!' Roque shouted.

Sesto drew his rapier, trembling with fear, and dashed out after Luka.

He met a man coming at him with a woodaxe, little more than a hatchet, and stuck him clumsily through the throat. Then he felt rather bad about it. For all his howling and warpaint, the man had seemed more scared than him.

Luka, and four of his most thuggish retainers – Fanciman, Tall Willm, Saint Bones and Saybee – led the brunt charge into the straggled southern line of attackers, and gave fearful account. Luka ripped a man open with his shamshir, then impaled another on his dagger. He kicked at a third, and then slashed at him once his sword was free. Tall Willm gutted a man with his saber. Saybee, the massive lee helmsman, swung a double-toothed axe forged in the norse lands and felled two men like trees. Strung around with various flint- and wheel-lock pistols on ribbon loops, Fanciman seemed never to need to reload. Saint Bones, his devilish rapier dancing, sang hymns as he slew.

To the north hand, Roque did the lion's share of the bloodletting, flanked by Tortoise Schell and Pietro the Hoof, two of his favoured armsmen.

And that was enough.

The attackers broke off and scattered, fleeing up the beach in both compass points. Their ululating had become howls of fear. They left weapons, drums and kettles on the sand behind them, along with twenty-four dead or dying men, six that Luka alone had dealt with.

The Rievers themselves had lost three, with four more wounded. One of the wounded was a man dragged, bloody and wailing, out of the stake-trap. Some of the stakes came with him, stuck through his legs. The hot afternoon stank of blood and sweat. Flies buzzed around them, suddenly swarming from the damp, leech-haunted forest beyond the huts, drawn by the reek of fresh blood.

'One lives yet,' Roque announced as some of his men dragged a bleeding, shivering attacker to face Luka.

The man was thrown to the ground at Luka's feet. He didn't dare look up. A pistol ball had shredded his right ear and blood was pouring out of the mangle onto the sand, where the drops quivered proud like rubies before slowly soaking away. Sesto could see that where the man's dark colouring had been smudged away, his flesh was as pale as any mainland Tilean.

Luka shook his head and knelt down to face the man, who whimpered and tried to turn away.

'You thought we were the Butcher Ship, didn't you?' Luka sighed.



**T**HE SUN SANK fast, as it does in the tropics, and a cool ocean snap blew in across them, spurring the last dregs of smoke off and away from the glowing, glassy embers of the oil trap. A thin crescent moon came out, fast as a claw extending, and stars lit their tiny lamps. In the dark foliage of the island forest, nocturnal insects began to thrill and peep and knock.

Sombre and half-hearted, kerchiefs tied around their mouths, the landing crew dragged the bodies of their enemy into a stack at the northern tip of the beach. No formal words were made, but some of the men came, one by one – Saint Bones, Fanciman, Pietro the Hoof, Roque – and muttered things to the dead, casting coins or rings or other trinkets into the heap.

Wards of protection, no doubt. The Rievers were cut throats, but this action had a sour taste.

Once the moon had cleared the tossing silhouette of the island's trees, Luka took a flaming torch from Saybee, and threw it on the heap.

The flames burned bright, white with heat, yellow with fat.

Sesto walked as far away from the pyre as he could get.

Down by the south end of Salvar Bernadette's beach, he discovered Roque, alone, drinking from a flask of jerez.

'A bad business,' Roque said, aware of Sesto in the night shadow behind him. He held out the flask.

Sesto took a sip. The sweet, heavy fortified wine tasted like silk.

'Mistaken identity,' the Estalian mariner went on, looking out into the sea, watching the waves roll up in gentle curls along a sandy waterline made glassy by the moonlight. Little red crabs scuttled and jumped on the mirror of sand, their caliper claws leaving marks that lasted just a heartbeat before the next sudsy curl smoothed them over.

Roque took the proffered bottle back. 'This Butcher. He makes butchers of us all.' Roque suddenly knelt and twisted the flask down upright in the dry sand to stop it upsetting. He leaned forward and washed his hands in the breakwater. It was too dark to tell if there was any blood on them, too dark too see if any was scrubbing off. Sesto was sure the act was essentially ritual. Or at least the contrition of a man's unhappy soul.

Roque had not been right since the dreadful night on Isla Verde. Only Sesto and Sheerglas knew that the fiend Gorge had rejected Roque for having spoiled blood. They had not spoken about it.

To his dying day, Sesto believed there was nothing more terrible to witness than a self-avowed killer trying to make amends for his own sins.

'I heard you argue,' said Sesto nervously.

'Then your ears as as big as the fool-boy Gello's!' Roque snapped.

'Forget I spoke, sir,' Sesto said, and turned away.

'Sesto!' Roque called. He got up, recovered his flask, and hurried to the young man's side.

'What?'

'Forgive me, sir. I forget myself in a gentleman's company. It has been a long time since—'

'Since what? Since you were at court, Señor Santiago Della Fortuna?'

'Yes. That is perhaps what I meant.'



'So you are that man? That famous discoverer?'

'Sesto, Sesto... that man is long dead, years dead. That man is also here. Make of that riddle what you will.'

'What happened to you?'

'I have sworn not to tell it. I... Let me just say, I travelled wide, made my name and fortune, and then pushed my luck against the fates of the fickle oceans too far. In Lustria, in that abominable land. Such things I saw... the scaled ones... they—'

He took a deep swig.

'Five years I was lost. Five years I will not speak of. It was as a low oar-slave on an Araby corsair galley that Luka found me. Found me, saw my worth... the man who stands before you on this beach tonight was born again whole at that moment. All that he had been before was melted away and lost.'

Sesto pursed his lips. 'You argued with Luka today.'

Roque nodded. 'We stalk the wrong prey here. There is a tyrant ship out in the waters of the islets, but not a butcher. And today we—'

He fell silent.

'I killed a man today,' Sesto said.

'Three myself. And none deserved it. If you killed, Sesto, you know this pain. The Butcher's taint makes even the best of us brute killers.'

The notion surprised Sesto somewhat. That curious pirate code again, no doubt: the notion that there were degrees to which one could be a killer.



**T**HE BALEFIRE BURNED on at the far corner of the beach. Nearer to the huts and shanties, driftwood bonfires had been built and lit. Their crackling heat and parched smoke billowed around the huts and drove off the night flies and mosquitoes.

Luka had a bellyful of wine in his skin by then, and sat morosely at a plain timber table in the main hut. 'Dead for a peso octo, all of them,' he muttered as Roque and

Sesto came in. 'Dead by our hand for trying to stay alive.'

Roque plonked his jerez on the table and Luka immediately helped himself.

'Living here in terror of the Butcher,' Luka mumbled darkly. 'Living here in terror of the monster out there. They put their all into scaring it off when it next came. The last of their oil, the last of their shot. They painted their skins black-and-skulled and made the noise of savages, all in the desperate hope it would drive the evil out. But the evil was us, and we killed them anyway.'

'Leave him,' Roque whispered to Sesto. 'In this black mood, he's a danger even to himself.'

But there was a noise from outside the hut that roused Luka before the pair could slip away.

Saint Bones and Garcia Garza had appeared, dragging with them a man they had found hiding in the woods. The previous survivor of the battle had died of bloodlet before he had been able to talk.

'Sigmar have mercy on me!' the man protested. He was a scruffy churchman from the Empire, his skin tanned by many years spreading the true word under a heathen southern sun.

'Sigmar can save his mercy,' Luka told him. 'I'll not harm you.'

'You are pirates!'

'Not at all. We are privateers, and we carry a letter of marque and reprisal to prove it.'

'But you... you slaughtered and you—'

'We were attacked, sir. By you and your fellows. We would have given quarter had we known.'

The man bowed his head and started on a prayer to Sigmar that seemed to Sesto to run in time to the beat of the crickets.

'Tell me of the Butcher Ship,' said Luka.

'It is our bane. It comes upon us at each new moon and demands all we have.'

That story again, four times heard now.

'Where does it go?'

'Go?'

'Go, from here?'

'South, and then we see it gybing east. They say it lurks in a cove within the Labyrinth.'

'Does it now? Which cove?'

'Some say Angel's Bar, others the Greenwater Sound.'

'Thank you, father,' Luka said. 'You may go free, and tell your brethren here that none of my men shall harm them now. This I make as a pledge to your god, Sigmar, so he might claim my poor, barbarian soul should I break it.'

The churchman got up, and started away.

'Father? My good father! One last thing...'

At the edge of the firelight, the man froze, fearing the very cruelest of pirate tricks.

'Father... what say you are the dimensions and character of the Butcher Ship?' asked Luka.

The balding, bronzed Empire man turned back slowly. 'It... it has three masts. A great barque of three hundred and fifty paces, with sixty cannon in two gun decks. Its hull and sails are black as night. Green fire burns where it should have a figurehead. The men who crew it are not men, they are night-beasts.'

'I see. Go in peace, father.'

Gratefully, the man disappeared into the night.

'The *Kymera*?' Roque asked.

'It fits the description. The *Kymera* is a great barque, two hundred and a twenty paces, and it mounts forty guns. But the churchman there was no mariner. A fearful man makes monsters of the truth. Just look at Belissi.'

Some of the Rievers gathered around laughed at this.

'Mother mine!' mocked Fanciman, querulously.

'So?' Roque asked.

'Be it the *Kymera* or some other bastard barque, we cut our way down into the Labyrinth to war with it. One thing's for sure, we'll not find it in Greenwater Sound.'

'Why not?' asked Sesto.

Luka tapped the side of his nose with a long finger. 'Old habits, old skills, Sesto. We're hunting prey that's threading the teeth. Greenwater Sound bottoms out at two fathoms. No barque, be it three hundred and a fifty paces or two hundred

and a twenty, could find harbour there. Angel's Bar, however, has no floor any man has ever managed to headline.'



**I**T WAS DARK still as they rode out back to the ships. They left the miserable bonfire at the beach-end blazing into the cold tropic night.

Before dawn, a fair wind came up, fresh and true, and the *Rumour* and its consort turned south and east, deeper into the archipelago.



**I**T SEEMED AS if they might run out of sea; so Sesto thought on the second day out from Salvar Bernadette. The islands, cased with fuming green foliage, were more densely packed here than ever before. The two ships edged their way down channel throats and narrow runs, luxuriant green jungle spilling down like cliffs on either side. Bright macaws and parrots darted from island to island overhead, and the *Rumour* and its consort were wont to glide through passages fraught with mist. The water was bright turquoise, speaking of a bottom perilously close to the *Rumour's* keel. This was the Labyrinth, a dense maze of islands that buffered the Estalia Littoral.

In bays swathed by rainforest, they anchored and rested. Vento and Largo had to chase chattering monkeys off the rigging, which they had mistaken for trees. Fahd's speciality became monkey stew. Each dawn, they had to mop the decks and rails clear of the dew left by the curling mists. Blades rusted quickly in this place, and guns choked and plugged. Roque kept drill after drill running to maintain the battle readiness of Silvaro's company.

On the fourth day, the *Rumour* led the *Safire* down a reef channel and around a bay beneath overhanging banks of beard

moss and draping bougainvillea towards a fathomless cove named after angels.

It was early, and there was scant wind, so the going was slow. At the head of an inlet that Silvaro said led straight out into Angel's Bar, they dropped anchor, and Casaudor was sent out in a longboat to spy around the inlet's turn.

'Why do we wait?' Sesto asked.

'No wind, so tell,' replied Benuto. 'If we force a fight, we'll want the wind with us, to press our advantage of speed.'

On the mid-decks below them, Roque was bringing out the arms-men, setting pavis and targettes along the rail on the starboard side rests. On the slopes of the hull, gun ports were being hooked open. Sesto could hear Sheerglas's command whistle shrilling from the gun deck as he ordered up his pieces. The *Rumour* was rolling up its sleeves for a fight.

Casaudor returned out of the early morning mist. He stood in the prow of the longboat, the six oars behind him slowly beating the sap green water, and sprang up the side as soon as he was close enough to take hold of a rope.

'Is it there?' asked Silvaro.

Casaudor nodded. 'Like a dream in the mist. It lies at anchor, massively dark of shape and sail. A green fire smokes at its prow.'

'The Butcher Ship?'

'I know not, but it looks the very devil of a thing. And if it is the Butcher, then the Butcher is not the *Kymera* after all.'

'What do you mean?'

Casaudor looked grim and spat out of the side of his mouth for good fortune. 'The old churchman was not exaggerating. This monster is three hundred and a fifty paces from stem to stern, and along its double gun decks nest sixty guns.'



THE OMINOUS NEWS spread. Many fully expected Silvaro to turn them around and quit such a confrontation, especially if this was not the prize they were after. On the *Safire*, indeed,

Silke began to make preparations to come about, until Silvaro signalled him otherwise.

'If we get wind, we'll go in at him,' Silvaro told his senior men. Several muttered oaths. 'Oh, he's a big bastard, by Casaudor's account, but we are two and we are quick and we have surprise on our side. Besides, I have to know. If this is the Butcher Ship, I have to know. And for the soul of Reyno, if no other, I have to strike.'

Roque nodded grimly. Casaudor too assented. The bo'sun in his crimson coat seemed too concerned with the mechanics of the fight to bother over the outcome.

Sesto sensed there was another reason behind Silvaro's decision. The Riever lord wanted vengeance for the blood he had been forced to spill on the beach of Salvar Bernadette.



A STRONG EASTERLY rose quite suddenly an hour after Casaudor's return, and though they were close reached by it, Silvaro made use of it at once. According to the first mate's report, the enemy lay with its head to the wind.

The blow lifted the mist away from the inlet like a curtain, and the tree-covered spits were revealed on either side, like barricades of jungle. Half-sheeted, the *Rumour* stole down the inlet's sound, and the *Safire* spurred in about forty lengths back on the port quarter. Both of the *Rumour's* armed watches gathered at the starboard rail, pikes ready at the shield wall, and the calivermen took their places. Bottles were handed around and sucked taken. Unlike some rogue crews, the Rievers would not go into battle drunk and roaring, but it was custom to toast for success and fortify nerves. Sesto accepted a drink from a bottle as it was passed along. His hands were shaking.

Silvaro called for more sheet and more speed. Then he walked down from the poop and approached Sesto. Sesto was preparing his little Araby wheellock.



'When we get into it, keep your head down. I'll not have you killed for nothing,' Silvaro ordered.

'I took a life on Salvar Bernadette,' Sesto replied bravely, despite his shaking hands. 'I'll claim at least one back for that here.'

Silvaro paused and pursed his lips. Sesto's words had clearly struck a chord. The Riever lord nodded, and tugged a long-barrelled flintlock out of his belt, handing it off butt-first to Sesto. The damn thing was monstrous heavy.

'Then take this, sir. It'll be more use to you than that little toy.'

Ruefully, Sesto put his ornate pocket pistol away and clapped a firm hold of the mighty handgun.

Silvaro was about to offer some other remark when the man up in the topcastle suddenly hallooed. The man was pointing to starboard, into the trees that rushed past on their right hand.

Sesto looked, wondering what the matter was. Then he saw it. His heart sank. What he had first taken to be tall treetops he now saw to be the royals and skysails of a most massive ship running east with them on the other side of the spit. The sails were black. Their enemy must have taken opportunity of the rising blow too, and was now riding his way down out of Angel's Bar from anchor. Due to its great size, the tops of its main masts stood up above the jungle trees. And the man in its topcastle had without doubt spied the *Rumour* and the *Safire* in the inlet.

Their surprise was gone. In another five minutes, they would both run clear of the spit-end into the open waters of the bar and be clean on, side to side. Side on to a sixty gun leviathan, the *Rumour* would be rent to matchwood.

'Loose some sheets! Loose some there!' Casaudor yelled, seeing the awful fate that bore down on them.

'Belay that!' Silvaro roared. Casaudor looked at him as if he was mad.

'We must turn and run! They have us!'

'No, sir!' Silvaro snarled. 'We will not break now! More sheet! Full sheet, you laggards! Full sheet and more besides! We will beat this unholy giant to the spithead!'

Trembling, Sesto realised Luka Silvaro's intention. The *Rumour* was a sleek, fast vessel – a 'slight hunting ship' he had called it. He meant to outrace the enemy barque before the spit was done and come around across its bows. But the barque was huge. Its plentiful sail cloth could push it at a tremendous speed.

The *Rumour* raised full running sail and filled its canvas fat with wind. For a moment, it paced ahead of the black topsails behind the trees. Then the jet sails began to catch up again. They slid above the tops of the forest, ominously suggestive, like the fin of a great fish cutting the water, hinting at the monster hidden below. The enemy had raised the black flag. In response, with a curse, Silvaro hoisted his jolie rouge.

Vento's ratings monkeyed up and down the ratlines, extending a pack of stud-sails before the main course and main top, and a flying jib before the fore staysail. At once, the additional sheets caused the *Rumour* to fly, and gain water at the expense of its lumbering foe.

A length they had on it, then a length and a half. The end of the forest spit was in sight, and the deep, bottomless open water of the Bar yawned out before them.

With less than a half minute to go before they cleared, Sesto looked back, and saw with dismay that the *Safire* had fallen away far behind down the inlet. Silke, it seemed, had chosen to sit this one out. And that, most as like, spelt doom for the *Rumour*.

As the *Rumour* cleared the spit-end into open water, it had two and half lengths on the massive barque. They slid out into the cove and immediately began to gybe to starboard.

Sesto got his first look at the enemy racing up to meet them. He had imagined many things supporting the black tops seen over the trees, and this was worse than any of them. A colossal dark ship, more than three times the size of the *Rumour*, its tight-yarded sheets black as pitch. A lambant green fire burned in a metal lantern afixed to the bow. Dark shapes – daemon bodies, Sesto supposed – swarmed on the decks and up the ratlines.

It was coming at them head on as they turned about across its front. Their starboard side was flat on to its racing bows. Did it mean to ram them?

The lurch of the fast-running *Rumour* was great now they had come into open swell. Sesto was forced to hang on as the deck pitched and rose.

He heard a whistle shrill and then felt the boom-shake of guns firing below him.

A full side let out at the enemy. Sesto couldn't hear the impacts, but he saw splashes in the sea beside the barque, and puffs of splinters and pieces of rail fly off from its bows. Its inner jib snapped and flapped away like a streamer.

Sheerglas's gun teams fired again, loosing chain shot this time. They had the range now, despite the rapid, cross-passing movement of the ships. All the enemy's jibs shredded off, along with the fore starboard ratlines. Dark shapes tumbled away into the rushing sea. The royal staysails ripped aside, or were torn into holes, and the top part of the foremast came down like a stricken tree.

White smoke puffed out either side of the hellish green lantern. The enemy had bow guns, heavy cannon by the look, and it had used them. A water spout leapt up beyond the *Rumour's* bows where one shot went wide. The other tore the luff edge out of the *Rumour's* biggest studdingsail and caused the loose canvas to snap and crack wildly in the blow. Severed yards whipped back and forth above the deck, despite Vento's efforts to team them in and control them. One savagely snapping line decapitated a rigger and sent him tumbling away off the upper ratlines into the sea. His blood fell like rain on all below.

'Again, Sheerglas!' Luka yelled. Working like devils, sweating in the hot, dark confines of the gundecks, the master gunner's teams succeeding in rattling off a third salvo as the *Rumour* came about, broad reached, around the mighty foe.

This did the most damage yet. Sesto winced as he saw parts of the bow quarters splinter and hole. Pieces of black wood fluttered up into the air, high above the level of the main sails.

Then it was all commotion. Silvaro bellowed orders that Benuto bellowed louder. Tende and Saybee hauled the wheel

round together and the ratings mobbed up the lines to bring the sheets to true. Roque gave a piped command that sent the armed watch over from the starboard to the port to re-establish their armoured wall there. The *Rumour* was turning now, its speed dropping suddenly as they went almost head to the wind. Silvaro was striving to keep the smallest possible profile towards the barque. Now they were all but bow on as the barque presented its starboard side to them.

The barque fired its starboard guns. It was a huge salvo, and for a moment, the hull of the ship disappeared behind an expanding cloud of firelit smoke. The broadside recoil rolled the barque heavily to its port line, and it began to lose sheets to close into battle.

The sea to either side of the *Rumour* blossomed with cannon-splash, and two heavy culverin balls smashed into the port bow just above the water line. The deck shook.

Silvaro edged the *Rumour* around just a hint so that Sheerglas had his port guns at a tight present. They flashed and fired. Hull boards and gun-port hatches blew out into the water, and smoke laced the space between the two ships. Another thundering broadside came from the devil barque. The *Rumour's* foresails exploded into shreds and several men on deck were slaughtered. Sesto could smell blood again. Blood, sea salt, sea wind, powder smoke.

The barque had dropped all speed, and was edging around, trying to out-turn the *Rumour*.

'In close! In close!' Silvaro ordered. The call seemed like suicide. As they came in shy of the barque's starboard side, its cannons flashed once again, and the *Rumour* shuddered as hull wood burst and rails blew away. The foremast was in tatters. Sesto saw at least one of Vento's riggers hanging, dismembered, from the foremast's torn ropes.

But the order was not madness. The barque's gunports, though plentiful, were high up on its waist, and once the sprightly *Rumour* got in close, the enemy couldn't angle its heaviest guns low enough to target the *Rumour's* hull. Still, their shots ripped through the sails. Few were more

than shreds now. Sheerglas used the foremost guns to drench the enemy with grape shot. The calivermen on the rails and rigging, and the men with the swivel guns began to pink at the closing foe. Cannons barked and flashed sporadically from its black sides. They had calivermen up too. Tortoise Schell, a cut-less in his hand as he waited for a chance to board, was killed stone dead by a caliver ball. Rodrigo Sal and Dirty Gabriel were shredded by chain shot that smashed through the pavises. Vento was impaled with splinters from the foremast along the left arm and chest, and fell twenty feet onto the deck. Largo ran aloft with his gold comb-morion in place, and spat arrows from his horse bow at anything moving at the enemy's rail.

They were at close quarters now, both ships almost dead in the water and shrouded by a gagging pall of gunsmoke. Grapples flew out from the *Rumour*, and poles reached to their extremities as the vessels, great and small, wrapped one another in a tight embrace of war.

The *Rumour* and the Butcher Ship came side to side, stem to stern. Just before their fenders crashed and grated against each other, Sheerglas fired a final retort and stove in the enemy's hull in six places just above the line of flotation.

Screaming, the Rievers began to mob and charge across onto the barque. They scrambled across boarding planks, clambered over nets, or swung out on yard ends. Ferocious hand-to-hand fighting broke out along the barque's starboard rail.

Sesto saw Silvaro storm across, and Casaudor and Benuto too. Even Tende had left the tiller and was leaping across the deep gap between the fighting ships, his Ebonian war-axe lofted in his hand. The caliver and swivel gun men along the *Rumour's* battered side blasted away at the heads of the enemy crewmen.

Sesto grabbed hold of a boarding line in the thick of the mayhem and steeled himself to go over. Ywgrawl grabbed at him.

'Are thee mad? Thou stays here!'

'The devil you say!' Sesto cursed, pushing the lean boucaner's hands away. 'I have a debt to pay!'

Pushing off, Sesto swung over onto the barque. The Rievers had made it look so easy. Sesto hadn't counted for the sheer drop between hulls that yawned below him, or the effort such a swing involved. Nor had he realised how hard it would be to hold on to a rope. When, more by luck than judgment, he landed hard on the barque's deck, he was almost impressed with himself, and swore privately he'd never do such a thing again.

Abruptly, he had more pressing matters to deal with. A member of the rival crew – a howling, bearded thug clad in red leather – charged at him, swinging a cut-less.

Badly balanced after his landing and all but falling over, Sesto tried to pull out the grand flintlock Silvaro had given him.

He got it free. But before he could actually fire it, the enemy cut-less dashed it to the deck.

The brute in the red leather kicked Sesto over and swung up his curved blade to finish him.

Then he fell over, hard, blood bubbling out of a neat little hole in his forehead.

Sesto lowered his ornate Arabyan piece. It had proved its worth, to him, at least.



**S**ILVARO, ROQUE and Casaudor, with a gang of Rievers, had almost fought their way down the mid-deck to the barque's wheel when the tide of battle turned, decisively at last.

It had been hard slugging and brute-blading all the way along. The decks were splashed with spilt blood, and Roque and Silvaro were both covered in scratches and gashes, their shirts shredded. Casaudor, somehow, was untouched, though his coat was stained with the blood of others.

Then they heard the rolling thunder of guns. They saw the flash and fizz beyond the port rail and felt the wet deck beneath them shudder and protest.

The *Safire* had stormed out of the inlet, having deliberately hung back to allow the enemy to pass clear. Now it came in, fast as an arrow, full sheets fat, giving out



cannonade after cannonade from its starboard guns.

It sped up along the barque's port side, firing and flashing and adding to the smoke pall.

No man could argue with the situation. The great barque was vanquished.

The Rievers had won.



**Y**OU PRETENDED?' Luka Silvaro hissed. He was incredulous. 'We did. It seemed to be the thing... I mean to say, it worked.'

'It worked. Did it?'

'Yes, lord...'

They stood in the barque's master cabin. The air was still filmy with smoke, and blood and water dripped down from between the ceiling boards. Luka stood at one end with Roque and Sesto. At the other, under the blown-out window lights, a powder-burned and bleeding man sat in a chair he had been forced into.

'By what name was this barque known?'

'It is the *Demiurge*, lord.'

'And by what name are you known?'

'I am Pieter Pieters, of Bretonnia born. I was master mate of this craft. My captain was Henri the Little, also known as Bearded John. I saw you kill him in the tiller house, lord. I saw your sword sever his neck not fifteen minutes past.'

'So I did. His blood stains my shirt. And his neck-bone put a dink in my favourite shamshir.' Luka's voice was full of boiling threat. 'Bearded John I know. And the *Demiurge*. Consort to the *Kymera*, the vessel of Red Henri of Breton.'

'The same, lord.' Pieters coughed up a good deal of blood and fell slackly back in the chair. Silvaro paced forward and dragged the dying man up by the hair.

'And you say this is... pretence?'

'Lord?'

'You pretended to be the Butcher Ship?'

Pieters leaned forward and set his elbows on his knees. 'It was easy enough. The whole of the sea fears the Butcher Ship. We clad us up in black and set a chemical lamp

at our bows for effect. Every port we came to gave us vittals with no argument. We ruled the Labyrinth and the Littoral with fear. They were terrified of us. Reputation is everything.'

'It is indeed,' said Silvaro. 'So what do you know of the real Butcher? Is it Henri?'

'It is, sir.'

'The *Kymera* is the Butcher Ship?'

'It is, sir.'

'Do you know how that might be?'

Pieters dropped his head. 'It was the end of last season, shortly before we were due to return to Sartosa. We were a company of four – the *Kymera*, the *Demiurge*, the *Alastor* and the *Diadem*. One day, Henri sighted a Tilean treasure ship, returning from Lustria or mayhap Araby or mayhap the dark continent of the south, heading across the Bay of Tilea at great speed, and gave chase. All of us were soon outdistanced by both Henri's powerful galleon and the fleeing prey – which was moving with unnatural speed. We never saw Henri again, though we expected him to turn back for us once he'd made his kill... or the treasure ship escaped.'

'And then what?'

'What? Nothing! Henri never came back. What terror or toxin he found on that treasure ship, I cannot say. It was like unto a magic ship, a cursed mast, running against the laws of nature across the sea. Henri was a fool to chase it, and a greater fool to touch it. What it has made him, I dread to think.'

'Though you were happy to live off his new reputation,' Silvaro sneered.

'It was a living until you came along,' Pieters said.

Silvaro turned away.

'One thing I must ask,' Pieters said.

'When you came for us, you flew the jolie rouge. Does that mark still stand now?'

'I forgot about that,' Luka Silvaro said, turning back. His shamshir whistled as it slid through the air. Pieters's head bounced off the deck boards.

'Yes, it bloody does still stand,' hissed Silvaro, as he strode out of the cabin. ♣



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# SECTOR THIRTEEN

## A GIAPHAS GAIN ADVENTURE BY SANDY MITCHELL

**O**F ALL THE worlds I've visited in my long and discreditable career, I suppose Keffia stands out as one of the most pleasant. In the abstract, at least; we were there to fight a war, don't forget, so there was plenty to keep the mind occupied, but in the main I look back on my years there through a faint haze of nostalgia.

Being an agriworld the landscape was almost completely rural, so my overriding impression was one of endless plains of lush greenery cut across by isolated roads, which occasionally intersected at quaint rustic villages where nothing much seemed to have changed since the Emperor was in short trousers. The climate was pleasant too, the small ice caps trickling clear fresh water into all three continents from large polar mountain ranges, while the narrow equatorial band was mercifully free of any land mass worth fighting over. There were a few small island chains, where tiny inbred communities fished and grew tropical fruit, but they were too insignificant to have attracted any enemy attention and were ignored by our side too after the initial sweeps.

All in all I was pretty pleased with life. My inadvertent heroism on Desolatia a couple of years before had won me a little notoriety among the Imperial task force, and I'd been able to capitalize on that quite nicely. Even after all this time there were still sufficient senior officers and administratum functionaries wanting to shake my hand to keep me comfortably occupied attending receptions and seminars far from the fighting, so that I frequently found myself away from my unit for days on end. A deprivation that Colonel Mostrue, our commanding officer, bore with commendable fortitude, I have to say.

Even while I was at my post things were hardly onerous. The 12th Valhallan Field Artillery were parked well behind the lines, as you'd expect, so I'd had little occasion to face the enemy directly. Indeed, since we were engaged in a protracted campaign to cleanse the planet of a genestealer infestation, there was seldom anything to fire our guns at in any case. The war was a subtle one for the most part, of counter-insurgency and surgical strikes, with the enemy seldom massing in numbers sufficient to justify an artillery barrage. The occasional exceptions to this were renegade units of the local Planetary Defence Force, which would turn out to be riddled with 'stealer cultists with depressing regularity, and turn their guns on the guard or the local units sent to deal with them until our overwhelming superiority in numbers and firepower had their inevitable effect.

Like most agriworlds, Keffia was sparsely populated by Imperial standards. This made our job of cleansing the place both easier and harder than it might have been. Easier, in that cities were few and far between (I think there were no more than a dozen on the entire globe), which meant that the dense concentrations of population a 'stealer cult needs to really take root and hide in were absent, but harder in that the cult had instead become attenuated, spreading its tentacles widely in small pockets of infestation rather than remaining sufficiently concentrated to root out and destroy in a single strike. The upshot of all this was that we'd been forced into a protracted campaign, cleansing the world province by province, one brood at a time, and we'd already seen three winters come and go since we'd arrived here.

Some, of course, found the slow pace of the campaign frustrating, not least my crony and closest friend in the battery, Lieutenant Divas, who, as always, was chafing at the bit, eager to get the matter over with and move on to the next war.

'We're making progress,' I told him, uncorking the bottle of well-matured amasec which had somehow found its way into my kitbag after the last round of hand-shaking and finger food I'd been dragged off to. 'Both the northern continents are completely clean already.'

'But they were only ever lightly infested to begin with,' he rejoined, finding a couple of teabowls in the clutter on my desk which Jurgen, my aide, had failed to tidy up before disappearing on some mysterious errand of his own. 'The majority of the 'stealers were always down south of here. You know that.'

'Your point being?' I asked, pouring the amber liquid with care. Divas shrugged, looking uncannily like a bored child getting tired of the current amusement.

'I don't know. We could be here for years yet, if something doesn't change.'

'I suppose we could,' I agreed, trying not to sound too pleased at the prospect. That would have suited me fine, my adventures with the tyrannids on Desolatia striking me as more than enough excitement for one commissarial career. (Had I but known, of course, it had just been the prelude to a lifetime of narrow escapes from almost certain death. But back then I had yet to develop the innate paranoia which was to serve me so well in my subsequent century of running for cover and shooting back when I couldn't avoid it. The prolonged period of relative quiet had lulled me into a false sense of security, which a few years later would have elicited nothing more than a vague sense of waiting for the other boot to drop.) So, as I poured the drinks I had little inkling of the fact that the turning point of the entire campaign was no more than a few hours away, and that once again I would find myself caught up in the middle of events over which I had not the slightest control.

The irony was that I'd had my chance to avoid it, but at the time I thought I was being remarkably prudent in not doing so. You see Colonel Mostrue had never quite shaken the feeling that I'd been less than honest about my supposed heroism on Desolatia, when

my attempt to save my own neck had inadvertently stumbled across a swarm of 'nids which would otherwise have annihilated us, and my subsequent panicked dash back to our own lines had drawn them neatly into the killing zone of our guns. He'd never said anything directly about it, of course, but after that he made a point of creating subtle opportunities for me to prove my mettle, which generally amounted to nudging me in the general direction of trouble and looking out for any overt sign of reluctance to put myself in harm's way again. Luckily my side trips away from the battery had limited his opportunities for such amusements, but on a couple of occasions I'd been left with no alternative but to tag along with a forward observer unit with every outward show of enthusiasm to undermine my fraudulent reputation. As it turned out, these little expeditions hadn't been nearly as unpleasant as I'd anticipated. On each occasion we'd taken some fire from the cultists as soon as they realized we were sitting out ahead of our own lines calling in their positions to the battery, but to my well-disguised relief the subsequent barrages had taken care of that before they got close or accurate enough to be a real nuisance. To all intents and purposes they'd remained a distant threat, despite the occasional las-bolt putting a dent in the sandbags protecting us. Indeed, in all of these minor engagements I had never even seen the enemy close enough to tell whether they were true hybrids or merely their human dupes.

All that was about to change, though, when the colonel stuck his head into my office the morning after my chat with Divas.

'Commissar,' he said, nailing me with those ice-blue eyes, which always seemed to see a lot further into me than I was comfortable with. 'Do you have a moment?'

'Of course,' I responded, with every sign of politeness, ignoring the faint throbbing of the amasec hangover I'd brought into the room with me that morning. 'Can I offer you some tea?'

'Thank you, no.' He moved aside hastily as Jurgen began to pour an extra bowl; I'd known he'd refuse, of course, which is why I'd offered. My aide was a splendid fellow in many respects, not the least of which was a singular lack of imagination that he compensated for with a deference to



authority and a literally-minded approach to following orders which simplified my own life in many ways. But he was hardly the most prepossessing trooper in the guard, and apart from his habitual untidiness, his spectacular body odour meant that visitors were loath to linger in his general vicinity, certainly not for as long as it would take to drink a bowl of tanna leaf tea. (One of the few Valhallan habits I've picked up from my prolonged association with the natives of that icebound world, by the way. It's made from a plant that grows in the caverns there, and it has a faintly bitter aftertaste I find most refreshing.)

'As you wish.' I sipped at the fragrant liquid, and raised an eyebrow in polite enquiry. 'How can I help you?'

'There's a briefing about the deployment of the garrison troops this afternoon at brigade headquarters,' Mostrue said, clearly fighting the impulse to back away from Jurgen. Unlike the iceworlders I served with I had my office and quarters open to the sweet spring breezes, instead of air-conditioned to the temperature of a meat locker, and he clearly found the relative warmth mildly uncomfortable, not least because it let my aide's distinctive bouquet flourish. (Another good reason for leaving the windows open, of course.) 'I thought you might like to attend.'

And get palmed off on some risky reconnaissance mission to the battlefield as soon as we were there, no doubt. But I couldn't simply refuse; inviting me to observe the peacekeeping arrangements for the newly-cleansed continents on behalf of the commissariat was a courtesy, at least on the surface, so I thought I'd better just accept, go along, and hope I could find some excuse to hang back when the danger presented itself. I was just opening my mouth to agree, inwardly cursing the colonel, when Jurgen unexpectedly came to my rescue.

'Begging your pardon, sir, but if you're going to be leaving the battery you'd better reply to the Arbites first.'

'The Arbites?' Mostrue's eyebrow rose, in slightly exaggerated surprise. 'Have you been up to something I should be concerned about?'

Quite a bit, as it happened, but I wasn't about to tell him that. Instead I picked up the dataslate with the flashing red 'Urgent'

icon Jurgen had placed on my desk, and which I hadn't been able to face looking at through the hangover until the tanna tea kicked in, and glanced at it briefly.

'Not this time.' I smiled too, so we could both pretend it was a joke, and nodded to Jurgen. 'Thank you for reminding me.' I turned back to the colonel. 'A few of our gunners are in civilian custody. It seems they got a little over-exuberant in one of the local hostelrys last night.' I sighed, with carefully feigned regret. 'So pleasant as this little trip of yours sounds, I suppose I'll have to stay here and sort things out.'

'Of course.' He nodded soberly, always a sucker for the 'duty first' routine, and for once I didn't have to stretch it; discipline in the battery was definitely my responsibility, so I had the perfect excuse for sidestepping whatever little inconvenience he'd been planning to drop on me.

Of course if I'd known what sorting out that apparently trivial little piece of paperwork would lead to I'd have gone with him like a shot and taken my chances; but then I'd never have cemented my reputation as a bona-fide hero, and the war for Keffia would have taken another turn entirely.



THE NEAREST village to our artillery park, Pagus Parva, was about twenty minutes away, or ten the way Jurgen drove, so I had little time to enjoy the fresh spring air as it wafted in across the kilometres of open fields that lined the road. I'd become quite familiar with the place in the past few months, so I was already well aware that it was somewhat larger than its name implied. It was the bureaucratic centre of the region, sector thirteen on the maps of the continent we'd been supplied with by the local administratum, so boasted a handful of civic buildings as solid and imposing as the temples and libraries of far larger settlements. In peacetime it had been home to some two thousand souls rather than the handful of hundreds in the surrounding villages, most of them engaged in supporting the scattered farmsteads which clustered around it in some way, but

the upheaval of the war and the arrival of so many guardsmen in the area with pay packets in need of emptying had almost doubled the population. It goes without saying that most of the new arrivals were supporting the war effort by maintaining morale among the troopers in ways which didn't entirely meet the approval of the long-term residents. Or, for that matter, the local Arbites, which had tripled its manpower over the last few months. That had sounded pretty impressive until I'd realized all it meant was that the sector sergeant had been joined by a couple of resentful beatpounders from the provincial capital, who had clearly been selected on the basis of whoever the authorities there had felt the city was most able to manage perfectly well without.

The sergeant herself was another matter entirely, as I knew quite well, having taken care to establish good relations with the local arbites as soon as we were deployed in the region, and to my pleasant surprise this had developed into rather more than a simple working relationship. Wynetha Phu was a solid career officer in her mid thirties, about a decade older than I was at the time, with a full figure which looked quite good in uniform (and even better out of it, as I'd discovered on a couple of occasions). She was good at her job, knew most of the locals by sight if not by name and reputation, and had turned down the chance of promotion to more challenging duties in the city at least three times that I knew of because she enjoyed the sense of being part of a close-knit rural community. Despite our friendship, she eyed me coolly as I entered the Arbites post from which she exercised her stewardship of the scattered hamlets and villages of sector thirteen.

'You took your time,' she said. I shrugged, smiling cordially for the benefit of her subordinates, who were slouching around the place trying to look busy, and advanced through the colonnaded entrance hall of the sector house towards the high wooden counter, which barred the public from the working part of the building.

'I know. My apologies.' I adopted an expression of resigned good humour. 'They keep us pretty busy in the guard, you know.'

'I can imagine, if the ones we've got downstairs are anything to go by.' She prodded the rune, which retracted part of

the counter, having recognized her thumbprint, and recoiled slightly as Jurgen followed me through the gap. The nearest constable's jaw dropped visibly as the gap closed behind us with a faint squeak of un-oiled runners. 'Who's this?'

'My aide, Gunner Jurgen.' I performed the traditional back-and-forth hand gesture, which has accompanied informal introductions since time immemorial. 'Jurgen, Sergeant Phu of the Arbites.'

'Pleased to meet you, miss.' He threw her a sloppy salute, which wasn't strictly necessary, what with her being an arbitrator and all, but to Jurgen a sergeant was a sergeant and that was that. Besides, she appreciated the courtesy, and reciprocated with a nod.

'Likewise.' The pleasantries were reflexive, but Jurgen smiled broadly anyway, curdling the expression of the constable even more, if that were possible. Wynetha appeared to notice him for the first time. 'Larabi. Go and collect the commissar's men, and sort out the charge sheets.'

'Ma'am.' He acknowledged her order with a manifest lack of enthusiasm that would have got any trooper in the guard a stiff talking-to at the very least, and slouched off in the direction of the cells.

'You'd better go with him,' I told Jurgen. 'Make sure they behave themselves.'

'Sir.' He trotted off behind the constable, who seemed to move a little faster as his new companion approached, leaving me alone with Wynetha. I'd been hoping for a little friendly conversation, even a mild flirtation or two, but her mind was entirely on business that morning, and I had to make do with a smile and the offer of a mug of recaff.

'Let me guess,' I said, as I scanned the data slates and let them read my thumbprint to confirm that I'd taken charge of the recidivists in the name of the commissariat. 'Drunk and disorderly, lewd conduct, and a couple of brawls.' Wynetha's mouth quirked with what looked like genuine amusement.

'You obviously know your men well,' she said dryly. She sipped her mug of recaff.

'I know these ones a bit too well,' I said, scanning the five names which, between them, made up a good 10% of my workload. That might not sound much to you, but in a battery of over three hundred guardsmen it was a pretty impressive achievement in its

own way. 'Hochen, Nordstrom, Milsen, Jarvik,' and I raised my head to stare disapprovingly at the leading trooper as the small knot of men emerged sheepishly from the cells, 'and the inevitable Gunner Erhlisen.' He grinned at me with the abashed expression I'd become all too familiar with over the last couple of years. 'Tell me, Erhlisen, are you planning to make latrine orderly a full-time career?' He shrugged.

'We serve the Emperor as our talents direct,' he quoted, eliciting a handful of sniggers from among his compatriots.

'Where you're concerned, he delegates to me,' I riposted. The arbitrators looked a little surprised at the informality of the exchange, but I felt no obligation to enlighten them. Erhlisen had saved my life back on Desolatia, picking off a tyranid gargoyle, which was swooping on me from behind, and was under the fond illusion that I cut him a little more slack as a result. In actual fact he was completely mistaken about this, but I did nothing to disabuse him (or anyone else) of the notion, being keenly aware that if the rest of the troopers believed that looking out for the commissar's welfare would rebound to their own advantage I stood a much better chance of enjoying a long and successful career. I swept an evaluating eye over the little knot of troopers. 'All right, Nordstrom. Who started it?'

Of all of them, Nordstrom was visibly by far the worst for wear. The others might have been hung over still, but were at least able to function. Jarvik and Hochen had to hold him up between them, and he seemed to focus on the sound of my voice with a visible effort.

'I'm not sure, sir,' he managed to slur after a moment. 'Start what?' Milsen and Erhlisen exchanged glances and sniggered. If anyone had more clearly been in a brawl I had yet to meet them. Nordstrom's knuckles were bruised and bloodied, his face showing visible contusions, and as his torn, unfastened shirt swung open I caught sight of a dressing patch at the bottom of his ribcage.

'Is that a knife wound?' I asked, unable to keep a sudden flare of concern from my voice. If it was, the ensuing paperwork would take up the rest of the day. But Wynetha shook her head.

'No. It's superficial. It was hardly even bleeding when we found him.'

'And where was that?' I asked. She shrugged.

'An alley off Harvest Street.' No surprise there; it was right in the middle of the area most of the newer residents plied their trade in, a couple of square blocks of taverns, gambling dens and bordellos which had sprung up like mushrooms in the shadow of the Agricultural Records Office to the great discomfiture of the administratum adepts who worked there (at least, so they said).

'It was those grox-fondlers in the Crescent Moon,' Jarvik said. 'I bet you.' The others nodded, muttering dangerously. 'They put something in your drink, and rob you blind when you keel over.' That sounded like nothing more than barrack-room gossip to me, but Milsen was nodding eagerly in agreement.

'It's true. They did the same thing to me a couple of weeks back.' I glanced at Wynetha, who shrugged.

'Wouldn't surprise me if he did get rolled,' she said. 'We're always scraping drunken guardsmen off the streets around there, and they've usually been picked clean by the time we get to them.'

'I wasn't drunk!' Milsen asserted vehemently. 'Well, not very. Not that much, anyway. I know how to hold my ale.' That much, at least, I knew to be true. Most of the entries in the voluminous file I had on him were for minor infractions involving civic property and small items he'd 'found lying around somewhere' rather than excessive intoxication. I returned my attention to Nordstrom.

'Nordstrom,' I said slowly, trying to get him to concentrate. 'What's the last thing you remember?' His brow furrowed.

'Got inna fight.' That much was obvious, and judging by the condition he was in I'd be surprised if he remembered any of the details. But Wynetha pounced on the opening.

'Who with?' Once again Nordstrom's face contorted with the effort of thinking.

'Dunno,' he said at last. 'Did I win?'

'How about before that?' I suggested. This all seemed like a waste of time to me, but I supposed Wynetha had to at least make an effort to investigate what went on a few hundred metres from her sector house, and

the longer I lingered the more I could appreciate her company and the more time there was for Mostrue to leave for brigade headquarters without dragging me along to whatever little surprise he had planned.

'There was a girl, wasn't there?' Milsen interrupted. 'With purple hair?' I glared at him to try and shut him up, but Nordstrom was nodding. The ghost of a smile appeared on his face.

'Kamella.' For a moment a similar dreamy expression descended on Milsen too. 'Amazing tattoos.'

'I knew it.' Milsen looked triumphant. 'The last thing I remember before coming round in the alley is buying her a drink.'

'Ring any bells?' I asked Wynetha, who was also nodding, but with purposeful recognition.

'Sounds like one of the local joygirls. Works out of the Crescent Moon.'

'There, that proves it,' Jarvik said. He glanced meaningfully at his friends. 'Someone should go round there and sort them out.' It was pretty clear from the tone of his voice who he had in mind for the job. I had no objection to that in principle, having found other establishments more congenial for my own recreational purposes, but this was edging into the realm of things I didn't want to know about because they'd make my job more complicated if I did, so I cut in quickly before they said anything which sounded like a positive plan of action. After all, if I didn't know about any potential trouble I could hardly be expected to head it off, could I?

'I think we can safely leave that in the hands of the arbitrators,' I said with all the authority I could muster. To his credit Jarvik took the hint and shut up, although I would have laid a small wager that the next time I came to town I'd find the Crescent Moon's windows boarded up at the very least.

'Worth shaking the tree, I suppose,' Wynetha said, to my vague surprise. She looked at the constable she'd addressed before. 'Larabi, keep an eye on things while I'm gone.' She gestured to her other colleague, whose name I never caught, with a brusque jerk of her head. 'You're with me.' After a pace or two she paused, and smiled at me. 'Commissar? It was one of your men who made the complaint, after all.'

I was a little taken aback, I don't mind admitting. And had I realized what I was letting myself in for I would have loaded my collection of defaulters aboard the truck outside and headed back to the battery as fast as I could, and taken my chances with Mostrue. But it seemed like a harmless enough way of wasting a couple of hours on a pleasant spring morning, and there was always the possibility of a little time alone with Wynetha, so I found myself nodding in agreement.

'Good idea, sergeant. It'll save us having to bounce reports and datafiles off each other for the rest of the week.' I glanced disapprovingly at the little group of disheveled gunners. 'And give Nordstrom a chance to pull himself together before we leave.' I could see from the covert glances that the troopers exchanged I'd done the right thing there, reinforcing my carefully constructed facade of being firm but fair.

Then I strolled out of the building to join Wynetha, savouring the sweet spring sunshine for the last time that day.



**T**HE CRESCENT MOON was a seedy looking establishment at the best of times, which was after dark with the flare of pink and blue luminators flashing to lure the indiscriminating customer inside. In daylight it looked even worse, the peeling paint on the shutters and crumbling plascrete of the facade was a foretaste of the cheap wooden furnishings and even cheaper liquor on sale inside. There were some suspicious-looking stains on the pavement next to the waste bins that I took pains to give a wide berth to as Wynetha hammered on the door with the butt of her laspistol.

'Arbites! Open up!' she yelled, with surprising volume for a woman so small. After a few seconds of nothing happening she repeated the procedure, attracting the attention of a small gaggle of passing administratum drones that glanced at us furtively and started muttering to each other that it was about time somebody did something about that dreadful place. The door remained resolutely shut.



'Oh dear. There doesn't seem to be anyone in,' Wynetha said loudly, sarcasm dripping from every syllable. She turned to the constable, who had drawn his own sidearm with an anticipatory glint in his eye. 'We'll have to blow the hinges off.'

Someone had evidently been listening, because there was a sudden rattling of bolts and the door creaked open slightly to reveal an unhealthy-looking individual in badly-fitting clothes and a barman's apron which might originally have been some kind of colour under its patchwork of stains.

'Oh wait. My mistake.'

'Yes?' the man said, his hunched posture making his ingratiating tone sound even more insincere than it undoubtedly was. 'How can I help you officers?' His voice trailed off uncertainly as he caught sight of me for the first time. Whatever he'd been expecting, an Imperial Guard commissar certainly wasn't it. 'And Commissar...?'

'Ciaphas Cain,' I introduced myself, hoping that something of my reputation had preceded me; a pretty safe bet given the number of guardsmen among the clientele. A slight widening of his eyes suggested that it had indeed done so, but before I could capitalize on it Wynetha took charge again.

'Kamella Dobrevelsky. We want a quiet word.' Wynetha pushed past him without ceremony. 'She works here, right?'

'Yes, she does.' The barman scuttled after us, agitation oozing from every pore. 'But the management is in no way responsible for any actions by members of staff which contravene—'

'Shut it.' The new voice confused me for a moment, until I realized the constable had spoken. Until then I'd vaguely assumed he was mute. 'Just tell us where she is.'

'Upstairs.' The barman's eyes were fixed on the laspistols in the hands of the two arbitrators I glanced around, finding nothing that looked like a threat. The establishment was as shabby as I'd anticipated, looking more like a downhive drinking den than something you'd expect to find on an agriworld, but I guess their customers weren't paying for sophisticated decor.

'Thank you. Your co-operation has been noted,' Wynetha said dryly. We left the barman goggling after us, and headed for the door in the back of the room with a crudely lettered sign stapled to it saying

'Staff Only.' Behind it a corridor led to the back of the building, presumably to a storage area and, judging by the smell, either a kitchen or a waste dump (in a place like that it was hard to tell the difference), along with a rickety flight of stairs which ascended sharply to the left.

'This must be it,' I said. Wynetha agreed, and led the way up the stairs, which ran into a corridor running the length of the building lined with simple wooden doors. The three of us looked at each other and shrugged. 'One at a time?' I suggested.

'No need.' Wynetha jerked a thumb at the door to a nearby room a few metres along from us. It had a small ceramic plate adhering to it, with a picture of a fat pink pony in a ballet dress, and 'Kamella's Room' written underneath in wobbly letters that were presumably supposed to look like they'd been done in crayon. 'This must be it.' Before I could say anything humorous about her powers of deduction she turned suddenly, and kicked the thin wooden panel from its hinges.

A feminine shriek of surprise and outrage confirmed that we'd found our quarry, and the constable and I followed the sergeant quickly through the wreckage of the door.

'Kamella Dobrevelsky?' she asked, although the question was only a formality. The girl sitting up in the rumpled bed matched Milsen's description perfectly, purple hair tumbling round a narrow face twisted with shock and anger. 'Get some clothes on. You're coming with us.'

'What for?' She began to comply with ill grace, revealing a body entwined with tattoos of a strange but compelling design, just as Nordstrom had said. Despite myself I couldn't resist studying them, taking in how they accentuated the curves of her body, and as I did so I felt the palms of my hands begin to tingle, always a reliable warning from my subconscious that something isn't quite right. She looked up and glared at me. 'Enjoying the view, Ciaphas?'

'I didn't know you'd met,' Wynetha said, switching her attention to me, her tone the temperature of a Valhallan midwinter morning.

'We haven't,' I said. The faint narrowing of the joygirl's eyes as I spoke was enough to tell me that she realized the slip of the tongue had just given her away, and now

that the subconscious hint I'd noticed before was hammering against my forebrain it was obvious there was something not quite right about her musculature which the tattoos were designed to obscure. 'But I did tell the barman my name.' I began to draw my chainsword. 'And 'stealers communicate telepath—'

With an inhuman screech Kamella sprang from the bed, faster than I would have believed possible, barging into the constable who was still blocking the doorway. He tried to bring up his sidearm, but was too slow; Kamella's jaw elongated somehow, revealing a mouth full of razor-sharp fangs which clamped down on his throat, shearing through flesh and cartilage, and decorating the shabby room with a bright spray of crimson.

'Emperor on Earth!' Wynetha snapped off a shot, the las-bolt punching a hole through the shoddy partition wall next to its head as the shrieking hybrid turned from the spasming body of the constable back towards us. Beyond it I could hear feet in the corridor outside; even though I couldn't see the owners, the sound had a peculiar scuttling quality which raised the hairs on the back of my neck. The chainsword cleared the scabbard and I swung it desperately as Kamella leaped again. 'It's a whole nest of them!'

I parried a strike from a hand tipped with talon-like fingernails, feeling the blade bite through chitinous skin, and ducked as those murderous jaws snapped closed a hand span from my face. Wynetha fired again and for a moment I thought she'd missed, until I realized she was holding off the rest of the brood. Clearly I'd have to finish this on my own.

I swept the humming blade back in a counterstrike, taking the hybrid in the thorax, and severing the spinal column. Foul-smelling ichor gushed, reminding me uncomfortably for a moment of the gaunts I'd faced on Desolatia, and the thing that had called itself Kamella dropped at my feet.

'We're boxed in!' Wynetha yelled. It certainly looked that way. The narrow cubicle was windowless, the only doorway crowded with horribly distorted parodies of humanity howling for our blood. She was placing her shots with care, picking off any foolish enough to show themselves directly with las-bolts to the head or chest, and

pumping rounds through the thin wall from time to time to keep them from rushing the narrow space. I glanced around, a desperate plan beginning to form in my head.

'Keep them off as long as you can!' I yelled, swinging the humming blade at the thin wooden wall separating us from the adjoining cubicle. It bit hungrily, whining loudly as wood chips sprayed the room, and in seconds I'd carved a hole large enough to accommodate us. I jumped through, holding my humming weapon up ready to block an attack from the other side of the wall as I emerged, but the room beyond turned out to be unoccupied, and Golden Throne be praised, bright morning sunshine illuminated a shabby bedroom almost identical to the one we'd just left through a window so grubby it might almost have been opaque.

Nevertheless it was the work of a moment to smash the glass with the pommel of the chainsword and dive through, heedless of the drop beyond, while Wynetha sent a fusillade of parting shots through the gap behind us to delay our pursuers.

I hit the pavement hard, heedless of the jolt that drove the breath from my lungs, relaxing to absorb the impact with the instinct hammered into me by years on the assault courses of the Schola Progenium, and turned, drawing my own laspistol. A moment later Wynetha hit the ground beside me, and I peppered the window above us with vindictive enthusiasm, blowing the head of a thickset male from his shoulders. As he fell, I noticed a third arm growing from his right shoulder, tipped with razor-sharp talons.

'How many of these freaks are there?' I asked rhetorically, as the barman who'd let us in emerged from the door and leveled a stubber at us. Wynetha took him down with a snapshot to the gut before he could fire, and we looked at one another with grim understanding sparking between us.

'More than we can handle.' More of the grotesques were emerging from the shadows of the alleyways, moving with a coordinated purpose that was all the more unnerving for taking place in complete silence. With a chill which raised the hairs on my neck I realised that there were normal-looking humans among them too, carriers of the genestealer taint, doomed to birth more of these monstrous hybrids and

with their wills already warped by the telepathic influence of the brood. I recognised one of the administratum drones who'd passed us earlier, a piece of piping in his hands, advancing on us with murder in his eyes, a chilling contrast to the prissy bureaucrat of a few moments before.

'Pull back,' I suggested, suiting the action to the word and sprinting in the direction of the sector house, drawn to the promise of protection beneath the spreading wings of the aquila on the facade like a penitent to the confessional. (Not that I've been anywhere near one since the schola kicked me out, and I hardly ever told the truth in one while I was there, but you know what I mean.) Wynetha was with me, stride for stride, and our las pistols cracked in unison, striking down the cultists who were angling across the mouth of the street to cut us off. She activated her personal vox as we ran.

'Larabi. Break out the weapons, we're coming in hot.' All I could hear of the reply was the faint echo of static that told me her earpiece was activated, but her expression was enough to keep me appraised of the other end of the conversation. 'We've uncovered a stealer cult. Inform the divisional office and the local Guard units.' Her voice caught for a moment. 'No, he's dead. Just me and the commissar.'

I missed the next exchange because I was busy ducking a frenzied rush from a hybrid wielding a length of chain; I blocked it with the chainsword, slicing it through, and riposted with a desperate swing that took his head off. Good thing too, it was remarkably ugly, with far too much tongue. When I regained my balance she was looking at me. 'Are your men reliable?'

Well that was debatable really, but under the circumstances I'd expect them to act like the soldiers they were, so I just nodded. Wynetha activated her vox again.

'Arm the troopers.' A pause. 'I don't care how hung over they are, even if all they can do is remember which way to point a gun they're better than nothing.'

'They'll do a lot better than that,' I said, stung at the implied slur on the men I served with. True they were rear echelon warriors rather than frontline fighting troops – give them an earthshaker or two and they'd flatten a city block neat as you please – but small arms weren't really their specialty. On the other hand they practiced assiduously

on the shooting range, Mostrue saw to that, as he did every other regulation, and Ehrlsen at least was a pretty fair marksman, as I could attest from the mere fact that I was still breathing. And don't forget they'd fought off the 'nids on Desolatia, so even if they weren't exactly battle-hardened veterans they'd already proved they could fight up close and personal if they needed to. So all in all I felt pretty confident in their abilities.

'I hope so.' Wynetha took down the last of the cultists between us and the sector house, and we started across the open square towards it. Our boot soles rang on the flagstones, echoes rising from the facades of the encircling administratum blocks, and small chips of stone began to kick up around us, preceded by the distinctive crack of ionized air which accompanies a las weapon discharge and the deeper bark of a stubber or two. Despite myself I turned to look behind us, loosing off a couple of shots myself in the vague hope of keeping our assailants' heads down, then redoubled my efforts to reach the sector house.

My worst fears had been realized. The cultists had been joined by a handful of men in the uniform of the local PDF, who were armed with standard-issue lasguns, and several of the hybrids had produced personal firearms of one kind or another. There were more of them than I could have dreamed possible, dozens of twisted monstrosities crowding into the square from all directions, converging on us with a grim fixity of purpose that clenched my bowels.

'PDF renegades,' I gasped, feeling the air begin to rasp in my lungs. I couldn't keep this pace up for much longer, but to falter meant being torn apart by the mob of inhuman hybrids behind us. They surged on like a malevolent tide, untiring and implacable, uncannily reminiscent of the tyranid swarms that had forged their foul purpose and sent them out to infiltrate the Imperium.

'This is just getting better and better.' Wynetha smiled grimly, and dropped one of our leading pursuers. The others didn't even falter, flowing around it like water round a rock. Another group was just clearing the corner of the sector house, angling in to cut us off from our refuge. A las-bolt, more accurate than the rest, caught the hem of my greatcoat, tugging at it like an importunate child.

'Aim for the shooters,' I counseled. If we couldn't at least throw their aim off they'd have us cold in seconds. If they'd been proper guard troopers we'd have been dead already, of course, and I found myself thanking the Emperor for the habitual sloppiness of the PDF which, like most professional soldiers, I usually found so irritating. (Especially while trying to co-ordinate with them on the battlefield. It went without saying that on the few occasions we'd been forced to co-operate with the local forces Colonel Mostrue had been only too pleased to delegate this onerous task to me, and I'd had no choice but to comply with as much good grace as I could muster. Of all the varied duties of a commissar, I've always found liaising with PDF trolls amongst the most irritating.)

We turned in unison, aiming as best we could, but under the circumstances I didn't expect much. At the very best we were only delaying the inevitable until our pursuers closed, but I've always found that when you truly believe you only have seconds left to live each one becomes so precious you become determined to eke them out for as long as possible whatever the cost. We fired as one, expecting little effect, but to my astonishment the renegade troopers were falling, breaking, and running for cover.

'Cowards!' I bellowed, carried away with adrenaline and the reckless bravado of imminent death. 'Stand and fight like men, damn you!'

'Are you mad?' Wynetha was staring at me in astonishment, and I whipped my chainsword up into a defensive posture, ready to take on the first wave of hybrids that was already leaping towards us, inhuman jaws agape. 'Run, you idiot!' Only then did I realize that several of our would-be assailants were falling, bloody craters exploding across their chests, and the distinctive crack of las-fire was coming from behind us now. Instinct took over once again, and I followed her advice, finding the square behind us littered with the corpses of the cultists who had tried to cut us off.

'This way, commissar! Hurry!' Jurgen's familiar voice urged me on, and as I looked up at the sector house, now tantalizingly close, I caught sight of him crouched behind one of the columns supporting the portico, a lasgun raised and spitting death at the horde of cultists behind us. A moment later I

noticed another muzzle flash, and made out Erhlisen similarly positioned, picking off one target after another with smooth precision. He caught sight of me and grinned, no doubt enjoying himself hugely. Larabi was by the doors, the blue of his Arbites uniform standing out starkly against the rich polished wood, blazing away on full auto without even the pretence of expertise, but the crush of distorted bodies was so great aiming wasn't strictly necessary; wherever he pointed his weapon hybrids and human cultists alike fell like wheat before harvesters.

With Jurgen's encouragement ringing in my ears I put on a final spurt, vaguely surprised to find that a small part of my mind was still able to appreciate the rear view of Wynetha bounding up the steps a few metres ahead of me, and then almost before my senses could register it I was surrounded by the cool marble foyer of the sector house. I turned back to find Larabi closing the doors, while Jurgen and Erhlisen backed through them, still firing on the frenzied mob which by now were cresting the steps outside and bounding over their fallen comrades in a single-minded attempt to reach the narrowing gap.

They almost made it at that, the door stopped, centimetres from closing, blocked by a chitinous arm tipped by three scythe-like talons which gouged a deep groove from the thick hardwood as it flailed around for purchase. The two gunners leapt to assist the constable, putting their shoulders to the wood, but even with all three of them straining every muscle the sheer weight of the tide of bodies behind it began to force the doors open again. I slashed down with the humming chainsword, severing the obscene limb that dropped to the floor, thrashing and leaking foul-smelling ichor, and the door slammed to. Larabi triggered the locking mechanism, and thick steel bolts slammed home, securing it behind us.

'What the hell did you think you were playing at out there?' Wynetha was glaring at me, a complex mixture of emotions on her face. 'Were you trying to get yourself killed?' There was no point in admitting I'd been so far gone I hadn't even noticed our comrades had opened up a corridor to safety for us, so I just shrugged.



'Well, you know,' I said. 'Ladies first.' The effect was quite gratifying, I have to say; she hugged me briefly, failing to find any words, and turned away, already assessing our situation like the professional she was. Erhlisen and Larabi were looking at me with undisguised admiration, and I was suddenly sure (correctly, as it turned out) that suitably embroidered reports of my gallantry and heroism would be all over the sector before the week was over. I turned to Jurgen, who was taking in the scene outside with his usual phlegmatic manner. 'What's our situation?' I asked.

'Frakked,' Erhlisen muttered, before turning back to the nearest window and beginning to amuse himself by taking potshots at the abominations outside. Fortunately the Arbites tend to the sort of caution I was later to acquire, and the place was constructed to withstand a siege quite comfortably; the windows were narrowed, and placed to provide excellent firing positions.

'Pretty defensible,' Jurgen said, ignoring him. 'We could do with a couple of full squads to cover everything though. We're spread pretty thin.'

'Might as well wish for a chapter of Astartes while you're at it,' I said, but as usual my aide was immune to sarcasm and he just nodded.

'That would be nice,' he agreed.

'Where are the others?' I asked. Jurgen gestured towards the rear of the building.

'Milsen's covering the back door. He found some grenades in the armoury and he's booby-trapping the entrance. Hochen's with him. Jarvik's up on the roof.'

'What about Nordstrom?' I asked. 'Still sleeping it off?'

'I don't know.' Jurgen looked confused for a moment. 'I thought he was with us.'

'A building this size, he could be anywhere,' I said. Before we could speculate further the sound of las-fire cut across the silence. Drawing the obvious conclusion I glanced across at Erhlisen, but he was in the middle of reloading, and looked as puzzled as the rest of us.

'That came from inside!' Wynetha led the rush back towards the rear of the building. The firing intensified for a moment, then ended with a gurgling scream that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. Too impatient

to wait for the counter to retract I vaulted over it, landing heavily, and found myself facing the door to the rear of the building through which Jurgen and Larabi had disappeared to fetch the others. What seemed like a lifetime ago, but which my chronometer stubbornly insisted had been little more than an hour.

'Protect the brood!' Nordstrom appeared through the gap, a bloodstained combat knife gripped in his hand, his eyes as vacant as those of the infected humans outside. The full significance of the apparently trivial wound on his chest suddenly became clear to me. I sidestepped his swing, blocking reflexively with the chainsword, and took his hand off at the wrist.

To my amazement he didn't even slow down, spinning to strike at my eyes with the extended fingers of his other hand; I ducked my head just in time, feeling the impact against my skull, barely cushioned by my cap, and heard his fingers break an instant before the crack of a las-pistol next to my ear told me that Wynetha was still watching my back. As he fell, she ran past me, sprinting for the end of the corridor.

A las-bolt took her in the shoulder, spinning her back into my arms. I glanced at the wound, noting in passing that it was already cauterized so at least she wouldn't bleed to death, before handing her back to Larabi. Milsen was at the far end of the corridor, his lasgun aimed at us, a dozen or so frag grenades crudely wired to the thick wooden door behind him. A faint scrabbling sound betrayed the presence of our assailants beyond it, still determined to break through. Hochen's body was lying between us in a pool of blood, clearly beyond any medical aid.

'Cease fire, you idiot!' I yelled. 'It's us!'

'I know.' The emotionless timbre of his voice warned me what he was about to do even before my conscious mind registered the blankness of his stare.

'Back!' I yelled to the others, even as he detonated the explosives, blowing the thick wooden door to splinters and himself to perdition. A shrieking tide of malformed malevolence burst through the gap, jaws gaping, talons extended to rend and tear. A volley of las-fire from all of us blasted into the first rank, but those behind just kept coming, barely slowed by

the obstruction of their fallen fellows. 'Fire and movement!'

It was a desperate gamble, but one we just made, taking it in turns to shoot down the front rank of hybrids while the rest of our party retreated to the stairwell leading to the roof. Even Wynetha managed to keep firing, her face pale with shock, as Larabi helped her up the staircase to safety. It was a close-run thing, mind, and we'd never have got away with it if the corridor hadn't been so narrow. Even now I break out in a cold sweat at the thought of how things would have gone if the monsters had been able to close a little faster, or our fire had been a little more attenuated.

'Up here, commissar!'

I grabbed the proffered hand gratefully, Erhlsen hauling me clear of the stairwell just as Jarvik lobbed a couple of grenades down among the seething mass of chitin, and Jurgen slammed the heavy steel fire door closed. The dull thud of the explosion shook the metal as I leaned against it and Larabi locked it closed. I gasped, the fresh air of the outside hitting my lungs like pure oxygen, leaving me momentarily giddy from the reaction.

'They seem pretty steamed,' Jarvik said, glancing over the side of the roof, and taking a random potshot into the crowd for luck. I followed his gaze, and the breath seemed to freeze in my throat. We were surrounded now by what seemed to be hundreds of the monstrosities, lapping around our flimsy refuge like the incoming tide round a sandcastle. In that moment I knew we were doomed, that all we could hope to do was stave off the inevitable.

'Look, sir!' Jurgen was pointing at something, a grin of imbecilic delight on his face, and for a moment I thought he'd gone mad under the strain. Then I saw it too, the unmistakable silhouette of an Imperial Chimera, and behind it another... 'It's the Cadians!'

Sure enough the column of armoured vehicles bore the crest of the Cadian 101st, an elite assault regiment that had just arrived in the sector from the victorious campaign in the north. Hard luck for them to be thrown straight back into the fighting, I thought at the time, but as it turned out it was just as well they were the closest guard unit and the first to respond to the message Wynetha had ordered Larabi to send. The unmistakable rattle of heavy bolters burst

across the square like thunder, scything the milling abominations down where they stood. We joined in enthusiastically from our perch on the roof, pouring down fire from above, watching in undisguised relief as the tide of obscenity broke in disorder. The thudding and scrabbling against the metal door died away as the brood realized it was facing a far greater threat than us, and turned to meet it.



**'W**ELL DONE, Cai.' Divas looked at the gleaming new medal on my coat with barely suppressed envy. As usual, he was the only one present to use the familiar form of my given name, and from the corner of my eye I noticed Wynetha, her dress uniform augmented by a sling which made her look fascinatingly amazonian, grin as she picked up on my thinly-disguised irritation. 'Looks like you got all the fun again.'

'It wasn't the same without you,' I assured him, straight-faced. I glanced across at Erhlsen, who was looking surprisingly subdued considering he was supposed to be another of the guests of honour. 'I expected you to be a bit happier under the circumstances, Erhlsen. Free drink, all the food you can eat...'

'I know. It's these.' He fingered the freshly sewn bombardier's stripes on his sleeve moodily. 'They're kind of... inhibiting.'

'Don't worry,' I assured him. 'Knowing you, I doubt you'll keep them for long.'

'Well, there is that,' he said, looking markedly more cheerful, and wandering off to investigate the buffet.

'What the six of you did...' Divas persisted. 'If you hadn't found the cult they would have infected every guard unit on the continent eventually. And we'd have lost the war. It doesn't bear thinking about.'

'Then don't,' I said. I was still getting reports in from the purges going on in practically every regiment on the planet, dozens of men executed for the taint they carried without even having been aware of the fact, and it left a sour taste in my mouth. I turned to Wynetha, desperate for a distraction. 'Care to dance?'

'To begin with,' she agreed. ❧

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE OR ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...



## TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT



## The Tale of the Knight

STORY: ANTHONY REYNOLDS • ART: JOHN STOKES • LETTERS: HONIA STEPHANSON



IN THE FAIR LANDS OF BRETONNIA, THERE ONCE LIVED A MAN CALLED **HUEBALD**.

'A LOW-BORN PEASANT, HE KNEW HIS PLACE IN THE WORLD, AND WAS CONTENT WITH HIS LOT. HE WAS A **HUNTER**, HIGHLY SKILLED WITH THE LONGBOW, AND HE STALKED THE GAME TRAILS WITHIN THE FOREST OF ARDEN.

'ONE DAY WHEN OUT HUNTING, HE HEARD SCREAMING...



'RUNNING THROUGH THE TREES, HUEBALD CAME ACROSS THE SOURCE OF THE SCREAMS...

'A NOBLE-LADY'S CARRIAGE WAS UNDER ATTACK BY THE **BEASTS** OF THE DEEP FOREST.

'HUEBALD BEGAN LOOSING ARROWS ONE AFTER ANOTHER, FIRING WITH GREAT **SKILL** AND **SPEED**.



'WITHIN MOMENTS, THE **FOUL CREATURES** WERE ALL SLAIN.'



'ONE OF THE FALLEN KNIGHTS STILL LIVED, AND WITH HIS DYING BREATH HE ADRESSED HUEBALD.'

I THANK THEE, GOOD SIR, FOR DEFENDING THE LADY ARIADNE'S HONOUR WHERE I COULD NOT. <GASP> IT BE MY WISH TO SEE YOU HONoured FOR THY NOBLE DEED.

AS FATE WOULD HAVE IT, HUEBALD HAD RESCUED THE LADY ARIADNE WHO WAS BETROTHED TO THE DUKE OF GISOREUX HIMSELF. WELL PLEASED HE WAS TO SEE HER SAFE, FOR HER BEAUTY WAS RENOWNED THROUGHOUT THE LANDS.

'AT THE BEHEST OF HIS FAIR BRIDE-TO-BE, AND TO HONOUR THE DEAD KNIGHT'S WISHES, THE DUKE - SOMEWHAT RELUCTANTLY - KNIGHTED THE PEASANT AS SIR HUEBALD.

'THERE WAS MUCH MUTTERING AT COURT, A PEASANT BECOMING A KNIGHT? WHO HAD EVER HEARD OF SUCH A THING?'



'THE NEWLY APPOINTED SIR HUEBALD WAS OUTFITTED BY THE DUKE HIMSELF. HE WAS GIVEN A *FINE* SUIT OF ARMOUR FROM THE DUKE'S ARMOURY...



'...A *NOBLE* STEED, HANDPICKED FROM THE DUKE'S OWN STABLES...



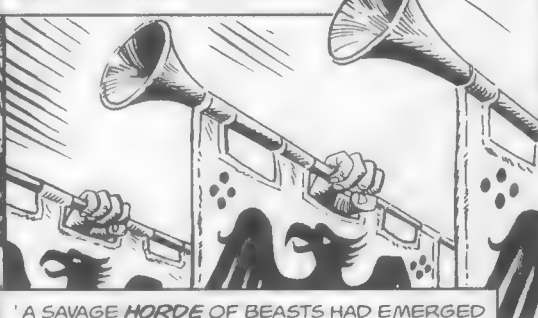
'...AND A *FAITHFUL* SQUIRE TO TEND HIS NEEDS.



'NO LONGER A PEASANT AT LEAST IN TITLE, SIR HUEBALD WAS MADE TO GIVE UP HIS BELOVED HANDCRAFTED LONGSUCH A WEAPON WAS DEEMED *UNFIT* FOR KNIGHT, AND A KNIGHT NOW WAS.



'THE NEXT MORNING, TRUMPETS BLEW THROUGHOUT THE CITY.



'A SAVAGE *HORDE* OF BEASTS HAD EMERGED FROM THE FOREST AND WAS ROAMING THE LANDS OF GISOREUX, *BURNING* AND *SLAYING* EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH.



'THE KNIGHTS OF GISOREUX MARSHALLED FOR WAR!'



ALAS, HAVING **NEVER** RIDDEN A STEED INTO BATTLE, AND NEVER BEFORE HAVING WEILDED A LANCE, NOBLE SIR HUEBALD **FELL** THAT DAY.

NONE MOURNED HIS PASSING. INDEED AT COURT THE **NOBLES** WERE PLEASED, FOR IT WAS FELT THAT A DIRTY PEASANT GIVEN KNIGHTS ACCROUTMENTS WAS A DIRTY PEASANT STILL.

'AFTER THE BATTLE HAD WANED, HUEBALD WAS FOUND **DEAD**, AN **ARROW** PROTRUDING FROM HIS BACK.

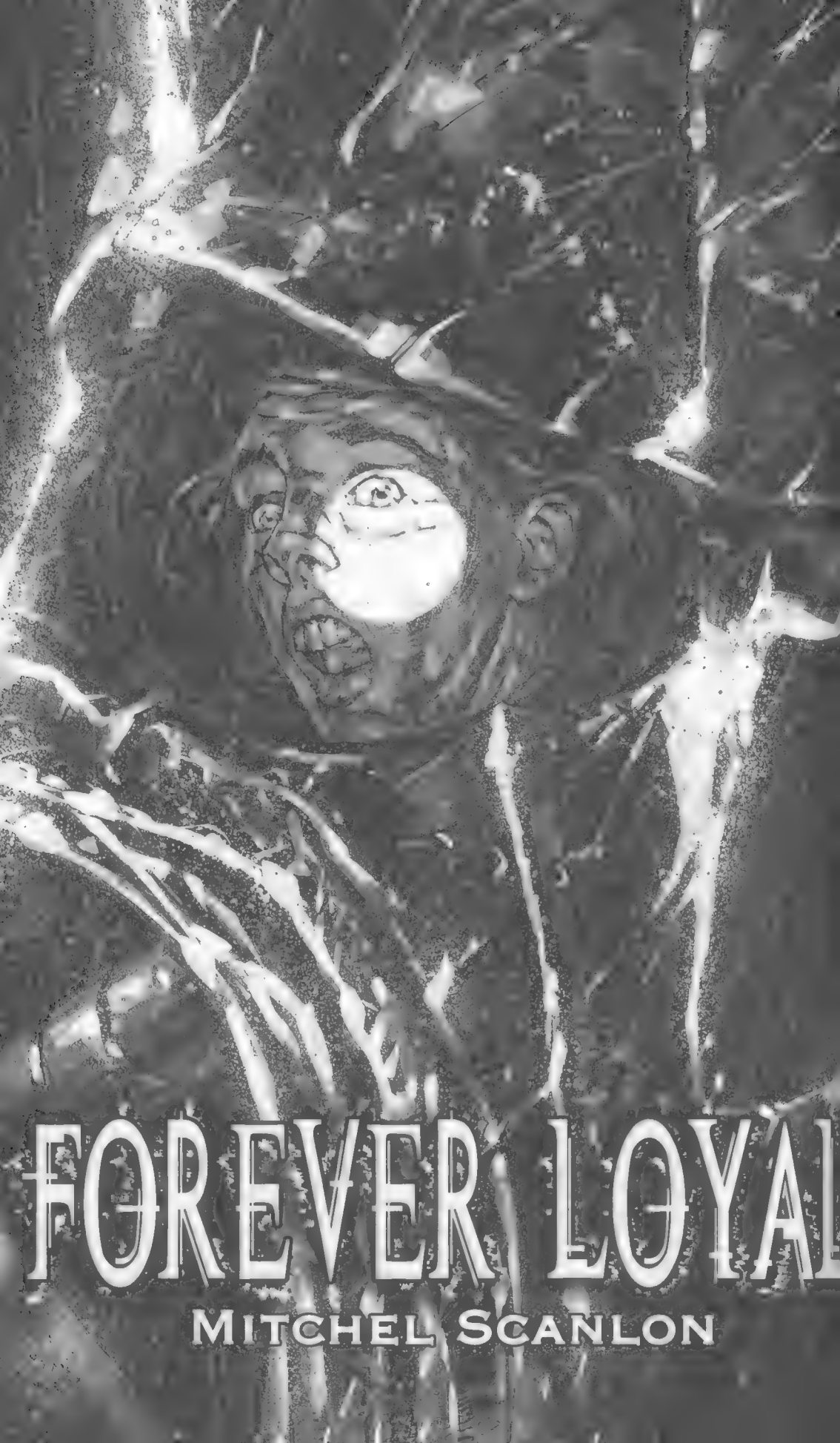
'THE NOBLES CLAIMED THAT SIR HUEBALD TURNED AND **FLED** FROM THE ENEMY, BRINGING DISHONOUR DOWN UPON HIMSELF, AND WAS SHOT BY AN ARROW FIRED BY THE **FOE** AS HE RAN. "WHAT ELSE CAN YOU EXPECT FROM A DIRTY PEASANT", THE NOBLES SAID, AND THEY WERE QUIETLY PLEASED.'

HOWEVER, SOME AT COURT WHISPERED THAT SIR HUEBALD'S SQUIRE HAD BEEN GIVEN A SINGLE GOLD COIN TO SHOOT HIS OWN MASTER IN THE BACK AS HE CHARGED. A GOLD COIN! MORE WEALTH THAN A PEASANT COULD EVER HOPE TO SEE IN **FIVE** LIFETIMES, LET ALONE ONE!

INDEED, IF HE HAD ANY SENSE AT ALL, HE MIGHT EVEN HAVE FLED AS FAR AS A CITY CALLED **TALABHEIM**, HUNDREDS OF MILES FROM BRETONNIA!

OF COURSE, IF THE PEASANT SQUIRE HAD ANY SENSE, HE WOULD HAVE **FLED** GISOREUX AFTER THE BATTLE. KNOWING WHAT HE KNEW, KNOWING THE NAME AND FACE OF HE WHO HAD GIVEN HIM THE COIN, HIS LIFE WOULD SURELY BE **FORFEIT**.

THE END



# FOREVER LOYAL

MITCHEL SCANLON



IT WAS WITH good reason they called it Hell's Marsh. A lesson Arvus Drel, former notary minoris to the planetary archives of His Excellency Governor Arbenal of the Imperial backwater Bajoris IV, had learned to his displeasure in the course of three miserable days spent within its bounds. Three days spent wearily trudging from one dismal quagmire to the next, while all the time the mud underfoot pulled treacherously at boot and ankle. Three days enduring the bites of szetze flies the size of a man's thumb. Three days of cold, damp discomfort. Hell's Marsh, indeed. Drel had cursed the whole damned place to hell with many a ragged and unhappy breath. Cursed the marsh. Cursed his companions. And, above all else, cursed that circumstance ever forced him to so foul and loathsome a place.

The notary looked behind him at the landscape as it stretched away. They had lost sight of the shuttle days ago, and he cursed that they could not have landed closer to his conjectured co-ordinates. But the treacherous swamps were too soft for the lumbering craft to settle on, and they had been forced to abandon it on the only safe section of land they could find. From then on it had been a long toil on foot. His gaze wandered up into the sky. Through the misty swarms of mosquitoes was Bajoris IV itself, hanging in space like a livid, blue balloon. His head spun slightly at the thought that he was no longer standing on the ground of the planet where he had spent all his life. Hell's Marsh was Bajoris's moon. It was uninhabited, dangerous and completely without value. Or so everyone thought. Never did he imagine that he would ever have had to set foot on its stinking surface. Yet here he was...

Sergeant Jarl, leader of the platoon of PDF Troopers assigned to escort Drel on his mission, glanced behind him and grinned.

'Ha. Now there's a face that could sour milk, my friends. From the looks of it, I'd say the notary was beginning to wish he'd never set foot on the marsh.'

A hulking brute of a man, Jarl seemed to find gruff and sly amusement in his charge's every discomfort. And, not for the first time, Drel found himself looking at the heavy fur of the cloak around Jarl's shoulders and wishing whatever unfortunate beast it once belonged to had put up more of a fight. Still, he was enough of a diplomat to keep the thought to himself. Instead, forcing a lacklustre smile, he tried a more civil reply.

'Not at all, sergeant. Though, granted, I had hoped we would be closer to our objective by now.'

'Teh. With country like this, it is always going to be slow progress, notary,' Jarl shrugged. 'If you know a shortcut to this lost city of yours, I'm sure we'd be glad to hear it.'

Biting his lip, Drel said nothing. The sergeant's mood seemed even enough, but three days in the marsh had already led to frayed tempers, and Drel knew better than to risk provoking Jarl and his men. They were Volgars, nomadic warrior tribesmen from the planet's polar wastes, probably conscripted into the Planetary Defence Force as punishment for non-payment of tithes. As far as Drel was concerned, they were little better than barbarians, with Jarl likely some minor clan chieftain awarded sergeant's rank as a mark of his status. Far from the civilised lifestyle he was used to, Drel was keenly aware of his isolation. He was in the company of men to whom violence came as second nature, men who would think no more of killing a man than Drel would of swatting one of these damned szetze flies. And, while the Volgars might be under orders to protect his life at all costs, he would not care to see their loyalty put too strongly to the test. Not with so many quagmires hereabouts where one might dispose of an inconvenient body. And especially not if they ever learned just how much they had been misled.

'The notary has gone quiet again, Jarl. Perhaps he don't know no shortcuts. Or else he's just enjoying his walk in the marsh so much, he doesn't want it to have an end.'

This from another of the Volgars, Trooper Skeg, a grizzled veteran whose elaborate facial tattoos failed to disguise the spectacular ugliness of the features beneath. All the Volgars wore similar designs, their ugly Northlander faces painted in swirling blue-black masks of whorls and arches, as though touched by the fingerprint of some savage god. But in his heart of hearts, Drel was forced to admit it was not just their stench he found intimidating. Never the largest nor most forceful of men himself, he felt dwarfed by his escorts' sheer physical presence. They were men built on a bigger scale, each one brawny, broad-shouldered and bear-like, standing half a head or more taller than him. And, while he suffered and stumbled through the marsh beside them, the Volgars seemed immune to every hardship.



It was then, as they made their way down yet another muddy and overgrown trail, that it happened. One of the Volgars had turned towards him with a sardonic smile, some fresh example of barbarian wit no doubt ready on his lips, when there came the sense of a distant discharge and a sudden stiffening of the air. Layer by layer, in the space of a single heartbeat, the trooper's face disappeared before Drel's horrified eyes, revealing first the wet red musculature beneath the skin, then the glistening white bone of the skull itself. For a moment the skull-face stared at him with empty sockets, an idiot smile seemingly still fixed upon its lipless mouth. The exposed spine rose from the undamaged flesh of the trooper's torso as though it were no more than some unwanted suit of clothing his skeleton was ready to discard. Then, abruptly, as though realising their mistake, flesh and bone alike collapsed in a steaming pile of offal. Though Drel might have screamed then, he found his horror at the gruesome spectacle outweighed by more pressing concerns. Spying movement in the long rushes on either side of the trail, he was forced to entertain the unwelcome notion that he himself might well be the next to die.

'Ambush!'

As Jarl's men shouted hoarse and desperate warnings, Drel saw half a dozen gaunt, machine-like figures emerge from among the rushes. Their bodies dripped with muck from the marsh, silent but for the eerie whisper of reed-stems whipping through the spaces of their ribs. The skeletal figures advanced towards them, eyes burning with ancient malice; a malice which found able counterpoint in the sickly green death-glow emanating from the strange weapons each machine-warrior held in unfeeling hands. One of their weapons fired and a trooper died an ugly death, reduced to a flailing skeleton in the blink of an eye. Then, in a roar of obscene oaths and battle-cries, the Volgars charged forward to meet the advance with lasguns blazing. Paralysed by indecision, Drel found himself briefly alone at the eye of the storm as, all around him, fragile flesh and unyielding metal met in uneven confrontation. He saw a machine-warrior cut down a screaming trooper right in front of him and for an instant the killer paused, death's head turning first one way, then the next as it cast about for a new victim. To Drel's horror, he saw the creature turn its smouldering and soulless eyes to gaze his way.

His panic-clumsy fingers scrabbled at the holster by his side as the creature advanced slowly towards him and Drel inadvertently took a step back. He abruptly realised his mistake as he felt his feet lose their purchase in the soft surface of the trail. He felt the ground slide away, the skeletal figure before him seeming to slip beneath his field of vision. It was replaced by a view of the dismal grey sky overhead as he landed on his back in the slurping mud of the marsh, the impact jarring the laspistol from his fear-slick fingers just as he finally managed to pull it free of its holster. Caught helpless, Drel saw the machine-creature loom over him, arms raised as it lifted the axe-blade at the end of its weapon to deliver a killing blow. But the blow never came – the creature suddenly spat out a spray of broken metal as a fist-sized hole appeared in the front of its face. It stood frozen for a moment, arms still raised, the symmetry of its death-mask features abruptly ruined, as eyes like burning coals became flickering embers. Then, strangely, the cadaverous outlines of its body seemed to almost soften and fade, before, in a sudden flaring flash of gangrenous light, the machine-warrior disappeared so swiftly it was as though it had never been there at all. Drel was left blinking in amazement, staring past where the metallic figure had been to see Sergeant Jarl standing a few paces behind, a thin line of smoke rising like a question mark from the barrel of the bolt pistol in his hand.

'Well, notary, they may look like death, but it seems if a man tries hard enough they can still be made to die.'



**T**HE ENEMY HAD been destroyed. But it soon became clear the men of Sergeant Jarl's platoon had paid a heavy price. Of the thirty men who had come down the trail only half still lived. Fifteen men were dead, their lives traded dearly for six of the enemy. Assuming the skull-faced figures that had ambushed them could ever be described as having lived at all.

Once a head count had been made and the wounds of the survivors dressed, Jarl and his men set about gathering the mostly skeletal remains of their dead before performing a brief approximation of the primitive funeral rites of their northern homelands. The body

of each dead trooper was tied into a foetal position with twine, their lasguns similarly tied to dead hands so they would have a weapon with which to fight the daemons that would confront them at the gates of the afterlife. Then, after some words had been said and Jarl had cut a shallow but bloody notch into his forearm in memory of each departed comrade, their huddled bodies were thrown one by one into a deep watery pit in the marsh. Drel noticed the Volgars were careful to strip the dead of any potentially useful equipment before consigning them to the waters – even removing the powerpacks from their lasguns. Whether this was a sign that they believed the dead had no need of such things in the Otherworld, or simply a matter of pragmatism outweighing superstition, he could not be sure. Not that he was overly concerned with the fate of the dead Volgars either way. When it came to the question of remains, he was more interested in those of the enemy.

Or rather, the lack thereof. For like the creature Jarl had slain, each of the machine-warriors had disappeared when they suffered fatal wounds, vanishing like night-time terrors at the first touch of dawn. It was a mystery to which Drel could give no explanation. But whatever the cause, the enemy were gone, leaving the bodies of their victims and a few scraps of twisted metal as the only sign of their passing.

Holding one such fragment in his hands, Drel gazed at it with mingled horror and fascination. It was curved, marked with rectangular tooth-shaped protrusions at its base, its outer surface still stained with the patina of the marsh while the inner seemed impossibly smooth and ageless. It looked to have come from the upper jaw of the creature that had nearly killed him. Standing there with that fragment in his hands, Drel found himself wondering just how long the creature had been there, lying hidden in stagnant waters waiting to repel any intruder in the marsh. Centuries, perhaps? Even millennia? Were there others still out there, waiting patiently somewhere on the trail ahead to finish what their fellows had started?

‘I’d say you owe us some answers, notary.’

It was Jarl, a dangerous edge to his voice as he spoke. He stood facing Drel, knife in one hand and blood trickling down his left arm from the fifteen fresh notches he had carved into his bicep. His men gathered behind him,

glowering at Drel with faces set in hard and unforgiving lines. Looking at them, Drel realised the next few minutes might well dictate the future course of his life. Not least the immediate question of whether he would ever leave this trail alive.

‘Answers, sergeant?’ he replied, in what he sincerely hoped was a commanding and imperious tone. ‘You have your orders. They should be enough.’

‘I’ve lost fifteen good men, notary. All of them kinfolk, or else blood-sworn to me. Men who would’ve trusted me to lead them into hell. It looks like that’s where I did lead them, blindly, and at your say-so. I want answers. I want to know why we came to this marsh. I want to know what those damned metal daemons were. Most of all, I want to know about this ruined city you told us you wanted to find, and what’s there that could be worth my men’s lives. I want to know all this now, notary. Or else I’m going to tell you where you can stick your orders. And then, I’m going to show you what you can put there with them.’

Jarl brandished his knife in front of Drel’s face by way of emphasis. For his part, Drel did his best to reassure himself he could still turn this situation to his advantage. He must pick his words carefully, and, above all else, show no fear. If the Volgars smelt blood in the water, all was lost.

‘What do you know of the history of this world, sergeant?’ he asked. Seeing Jarl’s answering sneer, he quickly continued. ‘Would it surprise you to learn that thousands of years ago, in the dark days before contact was re-established with the Imperium, people lived on Hell’s Marsh in much the same way as your people do now in Volgar? That they were divided into dozens of squabbling nomadic tribes who lived – and I mean no offence when I say this, sergeant – in a state of barbarism, barely comprehending that a wider galaxy even existed?’

‘I will take your word for it, notary,’ Jarl said, the dangerous tone still present in his voice, although for the moment, at least, he had lowered his knife. ‘But what does this have to do with our mission?’

‘Everything, sergeant. You see, sometime in this moon’s distant prehistory, one of those feuding tribes managed to raise themselves above their rivals. They called themselves the Neand, and somewhere in what are now these marshlands they built a city; a city from which they dominated this world for close to

five hundred years, at the same time demonstrating a level of technological sophistication far in advance of anyone else.'

'Phh. If these Neand of yours were so special, notary, how is it I have never heard of them?'

'Few have, sergeant. You must understand that the entire span of the rise and fall of Neand civilisation took place in a time before histories were written. Even most scholars count them as little more than myth. It was only recently, through some of our earliest written records, that it was established where their city was located. There, you have your answers. It is time we were on our way once more.'

'Hold fast, notary,' Jarl said, his eyes hard and tight with anger. 'I don't remember saying we were going anywhere. To hell with your city and your answers. I've lost fifteen men. I don't intend to lose any more!'

'I mourn for your dead, truly I do. They were heroes, each and every one of them. But to turn back now would only dishonour them. Nor would that be the worst of it. You must understand, sergeant, there are facts about the nature of our mission that I am not at liberty to disclose. Facts which, were you to hear them, would convince you instantly of its importance. But for now, let me remind you I am here at the express order of Governor Arbenal. And let me tell you, if you fail in your duty, you and your men may be jeopardising the life of our entire planet.'

'Strong words,' Jarl growled. 'Takes more than strong words though, to make a thing true.' But despite the show of anger, Drel could see the big man was starting to waver. As a barbaric warrior, he was easy prey to words like 'heroism' and 'honour,' and even as a conscript trooper, still fell prey to words like 'duty'.

'Be that as it may, search your heart for a moment and you will see the truth of what I tell you. Ask yourself: in all your years of service to the divine Emperor, have you ever fought anything like the creatures we fought here today? Ask yourself that, then tell me if you think I am lying when I tell you our world is doomed unless we complete our mission.'

Now it was Drel's turn to pause, letting the words hang in the air as the Volgars considered their weight. They were all wavering now. They looked uncomfortable, unsettled, uncertain. It was time to press home his advantage.

'I am not unaware of the sacrifices you and your men have made. Nor will I try to tell you that there may not be yet more sacrifices to come. The governor has given me wide powers in this matter, and so I offer you just reward for your bravery. Continue with me to the city and I promise that once the mission is ended I will see to it every man here is given an honourable discharge and free passage back to Volgar. And with it, fifty kilos of gold per man. Think of it: you will return to your homeland as free men and heroes. Heroes, incidentally, who will be as rich as kings. Think on that, then tell me if you still say orders be damned.'

No one answered. But, from the thoughtful gleam in each man's eyes, no answer was needed. The tide had turned. He had them now. With reason, argument, and a touch of bribery, he had won the day.

It was almost a pity that so much of it was untrue.



**N**OT ALL OF it, of course. The city itself was real enough, though it was all but forgotten, lost as surely in the mists of history as it was in the mists of the marsh. But as they made underway again, Drel reassured himself that even after thousands of years some part of the city and its treasures must still remain. And he would find them. He would not countenance any thought otherwise.

Jarl and his men were quiet now; their earlier banter replaced by a sombre watchfulness as they continued down the trail. The ambush by the 'metal daemons', as Jarl called them, had shaken the troopers badly, and Drel realised it was almost a miracle he had persuaded them to continue at all. A miracle of greed over superstition. No, not just greed. It was his promise of free passage back to Volgar that had clinched it. One did not need to be a barbarian to see these men longed to return to their homes with every fibre of their being. And now he had seen that weakness in them he would remember it. Given the events of the expedition thus far, he had every reason to believe it was a lever he might have to use again.

They paused as the trooper on point raised his hand to beckon caution. With ears straining at every sound they stood motionless for a moment, barely daring even to breathe. But there was only the oppressive ever-present noise of the marsh: the cries of distant birds, the buzz and hum of insects, the sound of marsh waters lapping gently against the muddy bank of the trail. Then, seemingly satisfied, the trooper on point signalled the advance once more. Drel realised their progress would be slow now; for all their bullish bravado, Jarl and his men were spooked, jumping at shadows and pausing at the slightest uncertain sound. They must be close to the city by now, close enough that the Volgars' newfound caution could only add a day to their journey at most. And he could afford to wait a day longer. He had already waited his entire life.

Of course, it was only recently he had even realised he had been waiting at all. It was not so unusual for a man in his position to know discontentment. He had served the governors of Bajoris IV for nearly thirty years, a nameless bureaucratic cog in the service of a succession of distant uncaring masters. And what had been his reward for those years of dedication? At the age of forty-three he had risen as far as he was going to as notary minoris to the planetary archives – a glorified librarian – while all around him, men barely more literate than Jarl were raised above him by virtue of contacts and influence he did not have. Was it really so surprising he had grown unhappy with his lot? And when in the course of cataloguing some of the oldest records in the archives he had found the papyrus scroll, was it surprising his thoughts had turned immediately to how he could make this remarkable discovery work for him?

The scroll was over four thousand years old: so fragile he had needed to use forceps to handle it. Misfiled by one of Drel's predecessors, it had lain gathering dust for centuries, until, seeing it, Drel had recognised its importance at once. As he read the scroll, he realised his entire life up to that point had been spent marking time until he found it.

The scroll contained a treatise by the sage Terodotus, outlining a brief history of the Neand. Written centuries after their downfall, it told of how, with the aid of their technology, the Neand had drained part of the marsh and built their city to be the hub of a burgeoning moon-wide empire. At the same

time, Terodotus wrote that the Neand were also a deeply religious people, whose lives were structured around regular rituals of praise and thanksgiving dedicated to their unnamed god – a god whose benevolence they held responsible for all their triumphs. In the name of their god, the Neand dominated Hell's Marsh (although it wasn't called that then) for centuries. But, for all their achievements, even they could not endure forever. Under weight of war with jealous tribal rivals, the boundaries of the Neand Empire were slowly pushed back until only the city in the marsh remained. Then, the waters of the marsh rose once more and the Neand found even their last stronghold threatened, though, finally, it was neither war nor waters, but religion that sealed their fate. In the wake of some form of religious schism, the guardians of the Neand's faith turned on their fellow city-dwellers, slaughtering every man, woman and child in a single terrifying night of bloodshed. Their city was slowly forgotten as it was gradually swallowed by the rising marsh. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, as Terodotus put it in the Old High Gothic dialect of his time.

So passes away the glories of this world.

But whatever wider parable the ancient sage had hoped to teach with his history of the Neand was lost on Arvus Drel. Instead, the tale of their city and its marvels awakened a desire he thought he had made peace with years ago. A desire for wealth, power and all the finer things. A desire for everything in his life that he had so far gone without. A desire awakened by a single, simple word.

*Archeotech.*

Before he had even finished reading the scroll, Arvus Drel found himself considering the resources at his disposal. With information as to the possible location of a vast treasure trove of archeotech at his fingertips, it was not a question of whether he would go after it.

It was only a question of how.



‘YOU REALISE, this is highly irregular,’ Captain Vlix had said, glancing up from the sheaf of papers on his desk to look sourly at Arvus Drel. ‘First you come here demanding I give you a

platoon of men and a shuttle. Now you say I can't even vox my superiors for approval?'

'As I said before, captain,' Drel replied, doing his best to imitate the smooth arrogance of an envoy on an important mission, 'this is a matter requiring more than the usual discretion. You will see it is all laid out plainly in the orders I have given you.'

'The orders. Yes...' Vlix's voice trailed off as his gaze returned to the papers on his desk. For long minutes he studied them, but Drel felt no great fear at the scrutiny. The signatures, Governor Arbenal's seal, even the paper's embossed watermark, were all quite genuine. As notary minoris to the planetary archives, he had access to countless such official documents. It had only been a matter of finding a suitable template and, making use of a previously unknown talent for forgery, creating some small alterations. Then, armed with his fraudulent papers, he had sought passage to an isolated PDF outpost to acquire the troops he needed to put his plans into motion.

'Corporal Drinn, bring me the duty roster.'

At last, despairing of finding any fault in them, the captain abandoned his inspection of the papers to press a stud on the vox-com at his desk. Then, as a corporal hurried from a nearby anteroom with a heavy logbook in his hands, Vlix took it from him and began leafing through the pages with a pained expression.

'You must understand,' he said, 'at an outpost like this, manpower is limited.'

'All the same, captain, I feel confident you will put every resource at my disposal,' Drel replied, the smugly condescending tone in his voice letting the captain know he expected nothing less.

'As you wish,' Vlix said, eyes returning to the pages of the roster before rising again with a subtle gleam. 'Now, as to those men you wanted, I do believe I may have found some suitable candidates.'

Abruptly, Captain Vlix stood up, absent-mindedly buttoning his uniform jacket as he strode from the office with Drel trailing behind him. There was a definite spring in the captain's step now, almost as though something he had seen in the roster had given him a new lease of life, a change that Drel could not help but view with a certain foreboding. Following Vlix through the cramped corridors of the command post, Drel began to hear the voices of dozens of shouting, cheering men. As they stepped into

the parade ground outside, he saw the source of the noise: a crowd of at least fifty troopers gathered in the centre of the parade ground, standing in a ring around some unseen spectacle. Seeing his commanding officer's approach, a harried lieutenant gave up his attempts to restore order to turn and smartly salute the captain.

'It's Sergeant Jarl, sir,' the lieutenant said, his voice helpless. 'He is demonstrating unarmed combat techniques to some of the men.'

Following in the captain's wake as he pushed his way through the cheering throng, Drel saw that at least half the men in the crowd were Volgar Irregulars. He saw money changing hands as odds were adjusted, other men squabbling, even coming to blows. Then, Vlix reached the inner circle of the crowd, and Drel saw what had caused all the excitement.

In the open space at the centre of the crowd, two men were fighting. One was quite possibly the biggest man Drel had ever seen: a tattoo-faced, top-knotted Volgar primitive wearing a heavy fur cloak with sergeant's stripes branded on his shoulder. He was unarmed. Although the other man – a uniformed local PDF trooper of less extraordinary build – was armed with a bayonet on the end of his lasgun, there was no question the Volgar had the advantage. Jabbing desperately with his weapon, it was all the trooper could do to keep the big man away. Suddenly, the trooper thrust too far and the Volgar caught hold of the lasgun barrel with one meaty hand. For a moment the two men struggled for possession of the weapon, though in truth the trooper was the only one struggling. At last, growing bored with the game, the giant used his grip on the lasgun to pull the trooper towards him, simultaneously raising his knee to make crushing contact with his opponent's groin. With a high-pitched scream the trooper bent double, his face striking one of the Volgar's raised elbows before collapsing to the ground as all around the other Volgars whooped in triumph.

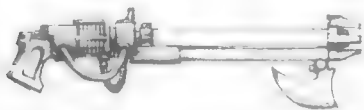
'Sergeant Jarl!' Vlix yelled.

As the Volgars fell into sullen silence, Drel despaired inwardly as he understood the reason for the spring he had seen in the captain's step earlier. Evidently it was in Vlix's mind to kill two snakes with one stone. He was going to give Drel the one group of men in his command he would be glad to see the back of – the Volgars. As he saw Jarl turn to



grudgingly salute his commander before walking towards them, Drel realised the captain's cunning might still work to his advantage. He noticed Jarl could not resist giving one last kick to the head of his fallen opponent before walking away.

Yes, thought Drel. On reflection, this is exactly the quality of man I need.



**A**ND I TELL you it is suicide!' Crouching beside him within the cover of a tall stand of reeds, Jarl's voice was an urgent whisper. And, as much as it would have suited his purpose to argue otherwise, privately Drel was forced to admit the sergeant might well be right.

Six days had passed since their meeting on the parade ground. And now, the day after the ambush on the trail, they had finally reached the ruins of the city in the marsh. Little of its former glories remained. From the occasional weathered outcrop of rock bearing the faint outlines of what once must have been exquisite carvings, Drel could see the majority of its buildings were submerged in the mud of the marsh beneath their feet. All that was left above the waterline were the monumental ruins before them – ruins of the great temple that had once dominated the city from a low hill at its centre. But even that had not escaped unscathed. Time and the elements had done their worst, leaving the temple and its surrounding walls in an alarming state of disrepair. Everywhere, eroded stonework seemed ready to collapse under the weight of time; to enter the temple at all was to risk being buried under a landslide of rubble. But it was not the perilous state of the place's masonry that had raised Jarl's ire. For all the carelessness of its ruin, the temple compound had not been left unguarded. At regular intervals, along every section of its crumbling outer gates and walls, stood more of the sinister machine-creatures that had ambushed them earlier.

'I count a dozen at least,' Jarl whispered. 'That's twice as many as before, and they killed half my men. So I say to hell with your gold and promises, the only place attacking that damned place would get us is dead!'

For perhaps the first time in years, Drel found himself without a ready answer. Jarl was right, whatever small numerical advantage the troopers possessed was easily outweighed by the sheer fearsomeness of the guardians which, even now, patrolled the wall ramparts or else stood motionless, with unblinking eyes trained on the landscape about them. Any hopes he had harboured that the creatures who had ambushed them on the trail might be the last of their kind were cruelly dashed. As matters stood, an assault on the temple could have only one outcome.

Watching them as they went about their duties, Drel pondered the nature of his enemy. They certainly seemed like machines: he found it impossible to believe they were essentially alive, as he was. But if they were machines, who had made them? Had the Neand created them to guard their city, leaving the sentries to stand unceasing at their posts long after their masters were as dust? There was no clear answer, but as an educated man Drel refused to be defeated. All things could be laid bare by reason, he told himself. And, if he had never seen the like of these machines before, then perhaps it was a question of considering when he had seen or heard of anything similar.

His first thoughts were of things he had heard of but never seen: the God-Machines of the Adeptus Titanicus, and the servitor creations of the Adeptus Mechanicus. But he quickly abandoned them; the Titans were giants, while the servitors of the tech-priests were said to be a fusion of machine and once-living flesh – neither remotely like the skeletal figures guarding the city. But the machine-creatures' eerily precise and methodical movements put him in mind of something else. Years ago, a merchant eager to win favour had purchased a set of life-sized clockwork automata shaped to look like marching guardsmen, and had gifted them to Governor Arbenal. They had been remarkably ingenious, attached to runners set in a circular grooved track. Once activated, the guardsmen would march round and round until the reserves of energy stored in their springs were exhausted. At first delighted, the governor had put them on display in his palace foyer, where Drel had seen them during his infrequent visits to the palace. Drel had always found something hideous in the mechanical figures' blank imitation of life, and he'd been pleased when,

finally growing tired of his gift, the governor had ordered the automata put into storage. But now, watching the temple walls, Drel saw something that made him think perhaps the machine-creatures and those automata were not so unalike.

From his vantage among the reeds, Drel saw a small piece of ageing wall rampart crumble beneath the feet of the metal warrior above it. Caught off-balance, the creature stood awkwardly on one leg for a moment, only to be doomed by its slowness of wit as, suddenly, the whole section of wall on which it stood collapsed, throwing the metal biped violently to the ground in a shower of toppling masonry. Crushed among fallen debris at the foot of the wall, it tried to free itself, impotently writhing its limbs, reminiscent of the struggles of an insect caught in molasses. Then, abruptly, its strength failing at last, the creature disappeared in a flash of ghastly green light. But what seemed extraordinary to Drel was the fact the other machine-creatures did not at any point go to help their fallen brother, or even turn their eyes to glance its way. And it occurred to him: what if the machine-creatures were just automata? More complex and sophisticated than the marching guardsmen perhaps, but still machines, with all a machine's limitations. What if they were only acting according to pre-defined instructions and incapable of responding to any situation unforeseen by their makers? If that were the case, it might be just the edge he needed. His mind made up, Drel turned to Jarl beside him, to give the crouched and glowering Volgar a confident smile.

'Suicide, sergeant? Not at all. I assure you, not only will we breach those temple gates, but we will live to tell the tale of it to our grandchildren afterwards.'



**T**HERE WERE FURTHER arguments, of course. But eventually even the most unimaginative of the Volgars were forced to admit his plan had merit. Then, after several hours scouring the marsh for suitable materials and applying the native skills that had probably stood them in good stead in their primitive homelands, the Volgars came to him with an acceptable facsimile of the device he had asked them to build.

It was a handcart of sorts, mounted on rough-carved wooden wheels and designed to be pushed towards its destination. Held together with reed-stem ropes and wooden dowels, with hand-rails set wide enough apart for three men to push it at once and a makeshift wooden hoarding to shield them, it looked every bit the flimsy scratch-built device it was. All the same, Drel was sure it would serve his purpose well enough.

'Now!' yelled Jarl.

From their hiding places among the reeds, the troopers opened up with their lasguns, concentrating their fire on the machine-creatures standing on the ramparts above the temple's dilapidated gates. The Volgars' marksmanship was poor, but still the machine-warriors seemed taken aback by the sudden withering fusillade of fire. Then, before the enemy could regain the initiative, a trio of Volgars emerged from the reeds to push the lumbering handcart towards the temple gates.

Watching them straining every sinew to move their recalcitrant burden through the mud, Drel began to believe his plan might work. As he had predicted, only the four guards nearest the gates had responded to the attack, the others standing motionless at their posts as though nothing was amiss. But then, he saw one of the gate-guards fire its weapon, a crackling beam of energy reducing the hoarding on top of the handcart to ash. Another of the creatures fired twice more, the first beam passing harmlessly over the heads of the handcart's crew. But with the second beam the creature found its range, flaying the flesh from a screaming crewman in an instant. Seeing it, Drel felt icy doubts clutch at his heart: if the machines thought to fire at the cart itself, the assault would be over. But the enemy seemed to lack the wit to shoot at anything other than the crew, while the remaining crewmen were careful to keep their heads down as the air above them boiled with virid fire. Then at last Drel saw the handcart finally reach the gates.

'Now, Jarl! Now!' he yelled as, seeing four machine-creatures sally forth to defend the gates, the handcart crew abandoned their burden and turned to run.

'Not until my men are clear,' Jarl rumbled back. He gripped a small black cylinder that was dwarfed in one giant fist. For a moment Drel feared loyalty might ruin everything. The machine-creatures at the gate decided the issue for them as they cut down the

fleeing troopers in mid-stride. Then, eyes dark with hatred, Jarl pressed the stud of the remote detonator in his hand and the handcart exploded.

It had taken every grenade and scrap of explosive the Volgars had, but Drel could not help but feel satisfied as the handcart's cargo detonated, enveloping the machine-creatures and the gate in a blinding flash of fire. He found himself even more satisfied when the smoke cleared to reveal splintered gates yawning open on broken hinges and no sign of any surviving guards.

'For Volgar!' Jarl screamed, as he rose from among the reeds and started for the shattered gates. 'And for the honour of our dead!'

Taking up their sergeant's cry, the remaining Volgars charged forward with him. Racing to keep up, Drel marvelled at the success of his plan. Even with the gates ruptured and their comrades destroyed, the remaining machine-warriors on other parts of the wall showed no sign of taking action. It was as he thought – each machine-warrior was detailed to guard its own section of wall and no other. With the sentries guarding the gates gone, and judging by the reaction of the others, he and the screaming horde of Volgars might as well have been ghosts.

After reaching the sheltering arc of the all but nonexistent gates, the Volgars paused long enough for Drel to catch up.

'Where to now, notary?' Jarl asked.

'The grey pyramid-shaped structure just ahead of us,' Drel panted, still out of breath. 'The main building of the temple. That is where the ancients would have kept most of their archeo... ah, the materials which are the object of our mission.'

If Jarl noticed the slip of the tongue, he gave no sign of it. Instead, turning to face his men, he said: 'You heard him. We go in two files and we go slow. Keep your wits sharp and your lasguns ready.'

Slowly then, eyes nervously scanning the ruined buildings either side for tell-tale movement, they advanced into the temple courtyard. Their objective, a squat and ugly pyramid with great stone steps running up its face, stood perhaps three hundred paces away at the centre of the temple complex. But with the sepulchral silence of that place restored, to Drel they seemed the longest steps he had ever taken. This was a place of the dead, where every shadow seemed to harbour hidden danger and the air hung

heavy with menace. But he had come too far to turn back. Even with every nerve in his body urging him to run and never look back, he refused to be dissuaded.

He was so close now. He need only walk between the double row of crown-sized silver domes marking out the pathway to the temple, and everything he had ever dreamed of would be in his hands. Power, riches, respect; he need only keep walking and it all would be his. As they made their way down the pathway, Drel saw one of the silver domes start to rise from the mud. It was then that he realised the magnitude of his error.

With nightmare slowness, two dozen machine-warriors rose from the ground on either side of them. A trooper screamed in pain, the sound dying abruptly as the fleshy apparatus birthing it was scourged from vacant bones. Another man died, lasgun falling unfired from skeletal hands as a bile-green light stripped them of their flesh. Then another, and another, and yet another. But, already running, Arvus Drel was not there to see it.

He ran for his life. He bounded up the steps of the pyramid in a dozen fear-crazed steps, his boots slipping and sliding under him. On reaching the doorway just below its apex, Drel felt his heart skip a beat as the door held fast. Jarl suddenly appeared beside him, putting a shoulder against it to force the screeching portal open. Darting inside, Drel dimly realised the surviving Volgars were right behind him. But he was past caring. He was running for his life, and, if Jarl had not grabbed him then and slammed him hard against the wall, he might never have stopped.

'You brought us here, damn you! Now tell us how to escape!' Jarl screamed. Behind, his men did their best to barricade the door by piling ancient funeral urns and reliquaries against it like so many sandbags. Jarl slapped him, hard enough to rattle his teeth. For a moment, Drel just stared dumbly back. Then, in a sudden burst of fevered insight, he saw the answer.

'The holy-of-holies!' he said, speaking quickly for fear Jarl might hit him again. 'Don't you see? For the machine-creatures to be guarding this temple it must be important to them in some way. There must be something here that is valuable. Something left by the Neand. Something they would not want to see damaged. And where better to keep something of value

than in the most sacred place in the temple – the holy-of-holies? That is where we should make our stand!’

Jarl stood brooding on his words for a moment. Then, abruptly, the decision was made for him, as the temple door disintegrated and the machine-creatures outside began to pick their way through a sea of upturned urns and reliquaries towards them.

‘We go then,’ Jarl said, pushing Drel before him. ‘But you had better find this place quick, notary, or I’ll kill you myself.’

Drel needed no such prompting. With Jarl and the Volgars following he ran down the corridor, the clanging echoes of metal feet behind them telling him the machine-warriors had not given up the pursuit. Now and then, Drel heard a Volgar scream. But he did not look back. He just kept on running, hopelessly lost, through a labyrinth of ancient marbled halls that lead him deeper and deeper within the earth. He ran past rooms full of all manner of extraordinary things: hieroglyphic obelisks, strange machines, the mummified remains of creatures seemingly saurian in origin, artefacts which would once have excited in him great awe and interest, but now could only ignore. He had run past such treasures. Run past glory. Run past riches. Run past ambition. With sudden desperate despair, Drel turned a corner to see the massive bulk of a stone door before him and realised he could run no farther.

‘You try the door, I’ll hold them back!’

It was Jarl, now his only living companion, a glimpse of white bone peering out through the ruptured flesh of his forearm where the beam of one of the machine-creatures’ weapons had caught him. The other troopers were dead, fleshless skeletons lying haphazardly along the path they had taken like a thread, leading back to the beginning of the labyrinth. But Jarl refused to go so easy into the night. Turning towards the relentless phalanx of approaching metal-warriors, he fired his laspistol with a scream of defiance. The las-bolts found their mark: two machine-creatures fell, then abruptly vanished. But there were so many now, marching remorselessly towards them with steps as sure and certain and inevitable as death.

Facing the door, Drel saw nine indecipherable sigils embossed at its centre, arranged like a code-pad in three rows of three. Lacking any better option he pressed them at random, hoping by desperate chance to stumble on the correct combination. A

hopeless task. But suprisingly, with an awful grinding of stone against stone, the door suddenly slid open. Amazed, Drel immediately stepped into the room beyond as the door began to close behind him. He heard Jarl’s voice and, turning, saw the sergeant throw his now-empty pistol at the enemy and start to run towards him. But it was too late, the door was all but shut between them. His last sight of Jarl through the diminishing gap of the doorway was the sergeant’s imploring face as the metal hands of the machine-creatures reached out for him.

‘The door, notary!’ Jarl screamed. ‘Stop it! Sweet Emperor, don’t let it close!’

But Drel did nothing.



**J**UDGING BY THE duration of the screams, it took Jarl a long time to die.

Long before they stopped, however, Drel had abandoned whatever polite interest in the sergeant’s fate he might once have maintained. Calm now that the impassable bulwark of the stone door stood between him and Jarl’s killers, he had already turned to inspect his newfound refuge.

He found himself in a vaulted room, fifteen paces wide and twice as many long. Facing him, the smoothly lustrous black stone of the far wall was blank, while the long granite walls on either side were covered in the same hieroglyphs he had seen elsewhere in the temple. On a small dais at the centre of the room there stood a lectern. Its flat, obsidian top was etched with the imprint of a three-fingered claw. Otherwise, the room was empty; though he quickly found his eyes drawn to an artful mosaic set into the middle of one of the hieroglyphic walls.

It depicted a smiling, golden figure, standing with hands held open in a welcoming gesture. Although human in proportions, the figure was obviously not human, possessing an elongated head and heavy downward-arching horns, with an elliptical groove set into the long expanse of its forehead. It could only be the Neand’s god. But while clearly intended as an object of veneration, Drel could not help but see something malevolent in the knowing curve of the figure’s smile. Perhaps it was the cunning artistry of the mosaic, but wherever

he walked in the room the eyes of the smiling god seemed to follow. The gaze was unsettling; almost as though the Neand's god had looked deep into his soul and saw something there to amuse it.

He noticed a more familiar script hidden among the hieroglyphs and realised some of the words on the wall were written in an archaic form of Old High Gothic dialect. Words which, slowly, haltingly, he began to translate. Standing in that ancient chamber, he saw the secret history of the Neand and their city unfold before him.

The Neand had not built this city; that was the first revelation. Millennia ago the Neand's nomadic ancestors had come and found a ruined city buried in the mud. The city was full to the brim with all manner of wondrous alien technologies, and littered with the mummified remains of an unknown race of sentient saurians, apparently native to the moon. Deciphering the hieroglyphs, the Neand had learned the saurians had founded the city aeons earlier, at the instruction of a benevolent god who had come to them from the stars. This star-god had given the saurians all their technology, asking in return only that they prove themselves worthy of his gifts. He told them he was a god who expected strength in all things. If his people were worthy, they would prosper in his absence. Then, promising to return sometime in the future to judge their labours, the star-god left them.

That the extinct saurians had not prospered was readily apparent. But refusing to read any omen in the failures of others, the Neand had settled in the city, mastering the technologies they found there to rebuild the city to its former glories. In the centuries that followed, they worshipped the saurians' god as their own, confident that when he returned he would be pleased to see how well the newcomers had used his gifts. Nor did their worship end there. The Neand also gave praise to the slumbering machine-servants the star-god had left behind; machines called Necrons, said to rest in a black stone monolith deep beneath the temple...

A black stone monolith.

With a start, Drel paused in his reading to look with fearful eyes at the black stone wall at the far end of the room. Could it be the outer wall of the monolith written of in the Neand accounts? Gazing at it he felt a shiver of apprehension, afraid at any moment a hidden panel might open and

machine-creatures emerge to kill him. But the stone of the wall was still and silent.

No, he told himself. If that was the monolith they would have come for me already. It is just a wall like any other, carved of a curiously lustrous stone perhaps, but no more sinister than the granite walls either side. But for all his own reassurances he could not escape a feeling of foreboding. Then, as much to distract his thoughts as anything else, he began to read what was written on the walls once more.

But the greatest gift the smiling god had left his people had not been the city, its technologies, or even the sleeping Necrons. Even though the star-god had told the saurians he expected them to show strength at all times, still he understood that inevitably they would face moments of weakness. And so he left a summoning device behind, in the shape of an obsidian-topped lectern – the same lectern in the room where Drel now stood. He promised that, come their darkest hour, one of them need only place a hand upon the device and the servants of their god would awaken to answer the call.

Come their darkest hour.

From what was written on the walls, it was clear the Neand took this promise as the final proof of their newfound god's benevolence. To them it was a covenant, a sacred contact upon which their entire civilisation was founded. And so, when after centuries of dominance they found themselves hemmed in by enemies and fighting a losing battle with the marsh, a momentous decision was reached. A delegation of priests was sent into the summoning chamber to put a hand upon the lectern and call their god's servants to them. And there, the records of the Neand abruptly ended.

Their darkest hour.

To Drel there seemed more questions here than answers. If the Neand summoned their god's servants, how was it their entire civilisation came to be destroyed? And if these servants – these Necrons – allowed the Neand's ancestors easy access to the marsh millennia ago, why today had they treated Drel and the Volgars as invaders? And then there was the matter of the saurians. Surely they would have seen the coming of whatever disaster engulfed them and turned to their god's servants for aid? It made no sense. Until he remembered the scroll he had seen in the planetary archives, and how the ancient sage Terodotus had written the Neand were



slaughtered by 'the guardians of their faith'. There was a similar Old High Gothic phrase written on these walls, but inadvertently Drel had given it a different translation. The same words which meant 'the guardians of their faith' could have another meaning.

The servants of their god!

With sudden insight he finally understood. The Neand had summoned their god's servants, just as the saurians must have aeons earlier. Only for both races to learn that when the Necrons were awakened they did not bring aid. They brought judgment. For, having summoned the Necrons, the peoples of the city had demonstrated weakness. And by showing weakness they had failed the star-god who, from the first, had told them just what manner of deity he was.

A god who expected strength in all things.

Staring at the smiling face of the figure on the mosaic before him, Drel could not help but shudder at the thought of a god who would leave such a bitter 'gift' for his people, knowing that one day, no matter how hard they struggled, they would succumb to the temptation to use the summoning device and then be destroyed. It was almost as though all of it – the rise and fall of the Neand civilisation and that of the saurians before them – had all been some dark and sinister game for their god's amusement.

Gazing at the god in the mosaic, Drel found himself hating the haughty curve of those sickle-bladed lips. It was as though the figure was laughing at him. Then, a revelation hit him that pushed all thoughts of the Neand, the saurians, and their laughing god aside. Glancing at the solid seamless walls of the wider room around him, Arvus Drel came to a sudden and frantic realisation.

He was trapped.



**T**IME PASSED. It passed at first with pleading, then screaming, then at the last with long ragged breaths. Then, when the dead eyes of Arvus Drel could no longer see it, a doorway opened.

For an instant, the black stone of the wall at the end of the summoning chamber seemed to shift almost imperceptibly, before a whole section of it rose to reveal something like a vertically hanging pool of bile-green waters.

Ripples spread and played across its surface, the green taint growing ever more vivid. Then, the waters of the pool seemed to coalesce as dark shadows appeared within them. Finally, a skeletal metal form broke the surface as, one by one, the guardians stepped from the monolith into the chamber.

They stood there for long moments, death-skull faces turning slowly, deliberately, to scan the room's interior with burning eyes. There, they saw a body lying beside the door at the other side of the room, fingers reduced to blood-encrusted stumps as their owner had desperately tried to claw his way through solid granite. Sure now that any danger of damage being inflicted on the delicate mechanisms of the summoning chamber had passed, the guardians collected the body and dragged it from the temple. This body once had a name. Once it was Arvus Drel, former notary minoris to the planetary archives of His Excellency Governor Arbenal. But the guardians did not care. To them it was simply the body of an intruder from one of the races who had already failed the test of the city. An intruder, killed by a need for food and water which they no longer shared. A body to be dragged outside and discarded to the muddy embrace of the marsh with its fellow invaders, like all the thousands of others who had come to the city before them. Then, with their duties for the moment done, the guardians returned to the monolith to sleep once more.

To sleep and to wait.

Perhaps, in time, more intruders would come from the failed races and the guardians would be awakened to drive them from the marsh once more. Perhaps, in time, a new race would evolve here and come to the marsh to see the city and the gifts their god had left for them. Their civilisation might even flourish for a time. Until, inevitably, one day they would come to the summoning chamber to put a hand upon the lectern and their god's servants would awaken to destroy them. Perhaps one day, even their god himself might return. But his servants, the Necrons, did not care. Regardless of whether he returned or not, they would continue to serve him. However much time passed, they would continue to wait. Whatever might come, they would never falter. While other races rose and fell, planets died, stars were extinguished, they would endure. It was the one sure and certain thing among the restless maelstrom of Eternity. Eternally steadfast. Unendingly patient. Faithful beyond death. ●

# RAGNAR BLACKMANE

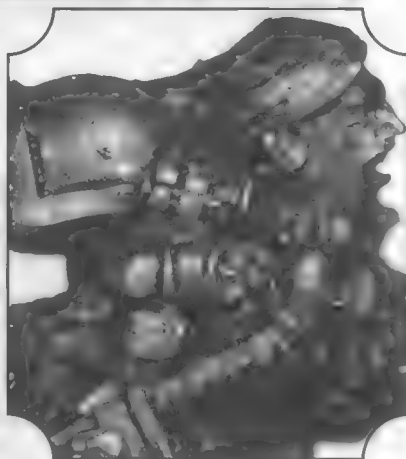
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# Wind Of Change

BY C L WERNER



**E**YES DARK AND cold stared upon the mountainous terrain, at the craggy piles of rock, the towering expanses of pine trees, at a world shrouded in white and clothed in the deathly embrace of winter. Such eyes had regarded this land for countless centuries, watching the seasons fade from short cool summers into long chill winters. They had seen mighty mountains rise from the plains as vast, primordial powers willed them into being. They had marked the same mountains become ravaged by wind and rain, by snow and glacier, until they at last crumbled into ugly mounds of broken rock. Trees had risen into gigantic towers of bark and pine needle from a single seed, only to topple into ruin as time and wind gnawed away at their strength. Over the ages, such eyes had discovered a great truth, that all that is mighty, all that is powerful and strong, all that stands proud and tall will one day be brought low. Only the wind and the cold were eternal.

A small cluster of shapes moved across the snowy wilderness, carefully following a seldom used path. Their way took them through the piles of rock and stone, beneath the boughs of the pine trees. Such intruders in this wilderness were seldom seen, but their kind was not unknown to those eyes that gazed upon them. It had been a long time, as men might reckon such things, since such wanderers had entered these lands. It would be a long time before their kind would be seen again in these lands.

The leading figure was tall and lithe, his long limbs and slender body clothed in a suit of darkened leather studded with steel, thick ruffs of fur spilling out from the sleeves and neck of the garments. A long fang of steel was sheathed at his waist, and a heavy crossbow was gripped in his gloved hands. The features of the pathfinder's face were lean, a sharp hawkish nose and narrow eyes mixing with an array of grey web-like scars. One of

these scars extended upwards through his scalp, forming a permanent part in the man's long black hair.

Nithrind scanned the snow-covered trees with his keen gaze, watching for any sign of life. As he did so, the heavy collar of black steel shifted, its chill surface momentarily touching his bare flesh. The elf casually placed a hand to his neck, tucking the fur trimming of his tunic beneath the collar once more. It was an automatic motion, one that the slave had become accustomed to long ago. It had been centuries since his neck had been bare, since he had wandered the craggy canyons of the Blackspine Mountains, far away in the south as a freeborn. It was an existence Nithrind could recall only dimly now, a dream that had been banished by the dawning sun. He could no longer remember what transgression, what failure he had been guilty of that had caused him to fall. If he had ever known, that knowledge had been burned out of his mind long ago by the torture lords of Karond Kar. Now, he was only a servant, a tool of his mistress. And serving his mistress well was the only joy left in Nithrind's thankless life.

The dark elf glanced back at the rest of the small hunting party. Nithrind was an old and experienced scout, the torture masters had left that knowledge in him. He had been in many wild and forlorn places. He'd helped fight the hated sons of Ulthuan, tracking their murderous shadow warriors through passes in the Viper Mountains. He'd hunted escaped slaves across the bleak expanse of the Red Desert. Once, he was almost certain, he'd led the party of a powerful highborn through the Witch Gate and into the caverns beneath Naggaroht to root out the nests of the reptilian cold ones. But never had he been so ill at ease before, so plagued by a sense of nagging dread. He had been in places every bit as desolate, every bit as bleak. This place felt different.

Their mistress had led them too far into the frigid north. The last of the watch towers that marked the border of Naggaroth was three days behind them now. They were drawing ever closer to the Chaos lands. As the thought came to Nithrind, he cast a dubious look at the snow beneath his feet, trying to tell himself that the seemingly pristine powder did not sparkle unnaturally in the sunlight whenever he observed it from the corner of his eye. The scout shook his head. Even if it did, it would not be of any consequence. It was not his decision to turn back. His life was simply to obey.

The hunting party trudged onward through the snow, following the slight trail left behind by the nimble-footed Nithrind. Unlike the scout, the other elves did not take any pains to leave the snow undisturbed. The effort to conceal their tracks would have been tedious with the beasts numbered amongst their company and cost them far more time than they were willing to lose. And, perhaps, they too felt the dread of this lonely place sinking into their bones. Perhaps it was reassuring to them to leave some sign of their passing on the land, some way of striking back at their forbidding surroundings.

The leader of the hunting party strode at the fore of the group. She was tall and slender, her body straining at the tight leather garments into which it had been poured. A heavy skirt of dark scales hung from her waist over the leather breeches, a garment torn from the hide of a war hydra grown too old to be of any further use to the masters of Naggaroth. Thorny flesh hooks of black steel were embedded in several of the scales, causing a tinny music like the tinkling of tiny bells every time the woman took a step. A long, cruel sword was sheathed against her right leg while a heavy whip with metal thorns was coiled upon her left hip. From above a sculpted, armoured breastplate, the severe, harsh features of Belithi considered the snow-covered pines with an arrogant disdain. Belithi was a highborn, one of the beastmasters of Karond Kar, daughter of one of the noble houses of the powerful elf city and as such, she alone of her small group harboured no trepidation with regard to their long march into the north. Her family trained new beastmasters, and Belithi was the greatest of Karond Kar's instructors, said to be exceeded in her skills only by the Beastlord Rakarth himself. Her pupils were the best Karond Kar would produce for the armies of

the Witch King and the households of the nobles. There was nothing in the wilds that was their equal.

After Belithi came her current pupils, both dressed in the black leather armour of apprentice beastmasters. Their bodies were exposed more fully to the elements, their arms and legs tinged blue with the cold of their surroundings. A part of their training was to become inured to all manner of hostile situations, to survive extremes of heat and cold and deprivation. They had almost completed their training; this current excursion was the final leg in their journey to becoming beastmasters. But they were still bound to Belithi and both of her students struggled to prevent their teeth from chattering, each of them recalling the swiftness and brutality with which their mistress would punish them for such weakness.

The older of the two apprentices was Tylath, son of one of the greatest of Karond Kar's highborn families. Everything had been made available to Tylath by his wealthy family, no expense had been spared in his education. It was only natural that he should have become the pupil of Belithi, the most highly regarded of the city's instructors. Though many clamoured to become Belithi's student, the wealth and influence of Tylath's family had ensured that he would rise to the fore. The elf wore an arrogant expression that was every bit as condescending and superior as that of Belithi herself. Only one thing spoiled the comparison. There was a look of unease, of uncertainty in Tylath's eyes that was utterly absent in the face of his mistress.

The other apprentice was Malador. His was not so fine a family as that of Tylath, and he had been forced to rely upon his own skills to make his way. Malador's was a weathered and cruel face, a face that spoke of years of bowing before creatures unworthy of his respect. Indeed, there was no love lost between Malador and his fellow pupil. Yet the two were linked by the unbreakable bonds of tradition. Beastmasters were trained as teams, they succeeded or failed as a team. In trying to ensure the success of Tylath, the very best possible partner had been selected for him. Malador owed the prestigious opportunity to learn from Belithi to Tylath's influence more than anything else, a fact that only deepened his loathing of the highborn.



Heavy chains were gripped in the hands of each of the student beastmasters, the chains leading to a massive collar of enchanted steel. The creature that wore the collar was every bit as tied to the success and failure of Tylath and Malador as the two elves were to each other. It was a monstrous brute, standing almost five feet tall at the shoulder, capable of rearing back on its hind legs and towering over twelve feet above the ground. Its scarred hide was covered in a thin pelt of crimson fur, a thick black mane surrounding its hateful head. Huge wings of wrinkled leather were folded against the sides of the monster's body, shrouding its wasted ribs and hungry belly. The limbs of the beast were thickly muscled, tipped with crescent shaped claws. The monster's long tail was tipped with a long spike of bone, a thin trickle of venom dripping from its hollow point. The beast's face swung from side to side, its broad nostrils flaring as it inhaled the scents of the frozen north. The creature's face was that of a lion, though there was a twisted suggestion of humanity in the set of its fang-ridden jaw, in the placement of its yellow, hate-filled eyes. It was a manticore, a creature of Chaos and dark sorcery captured by the beastmasters, its violent will broken by their whips and spells.

The last member of the hunting party followed a good distance behind the two students and their manticore, his dark-gloved hands wrapped within the tentacles of a number of studded leashes. Three huge hounds loped ahead of him, heavy brutes with broad shoulders and massive paws. The black dogs cast frequent, adoring looks at the elf holding their leashes. For his part, Uneldir ignored the beasts, his cold eyes favouring only the distant figure of Nithrind. Like the other elf, Uneldir was a slave who had been sold when he was very young by his family, traded along with a hundred other children of the Shadow Brotherhood to Belithi's house in exchange for a war hydra. Uneldir spat into the snow as he gazed at the distant figure of the scout, waving the hunting party forward. He should have been the one to lead the expedition, he was every bit the pathfinder and scout that Nithrind was. He was better, Uneldir was certain, if his cruel mistress would only give him the chance to show his value. He had told her as much. The slave lifted a gloved hand to the cruel scar running along his cheek where his mistress had struck him after he had dared to voice his

thoughts to her. Someday, he would show Belithi just how skilled he was, that he was more than a kennel boy. He would carve Nithrind's heart from the scout's broken body and present it to Belithi before he did the same to her.



NITHRIND WAITED for the rest of the hunting band at the crest of an icy rise overlooking a small valley. The elf scout kept his keen eyes roving across the forested expanse, studying the pine trees and shrouded clumps of snowy bushes, but time and again his eyes were drawn to the structure squatting just at the base of the rise. It was a small building, its walls built of heavy timbers, its roof heavily slanted so that the snow would slide down it to gather in great drifts to either side of the structure. For all of its crudity, the building was unmistakably elven in design, its sharp angles suggesting a precision and grace no other people could effect in their constructions.

Belithi and the others joined Nithrind on the rise. The beastmistress stared down at the lonely building, a slight smile flitting across her face. 'We will establish our camp here,' she informed the others.

'But what is this place, mistress?' asked Nithrind, his tone slightly uneasy. Belithi favoured her slave with a cruel smile, then struck him. The scout recoiled from the blow, his hand clutching at the bleeding scratches left behind by the steel studs covering the back of Belithi's glove.

'This is a hunting lodge,' Belithi informed her companions. 'Built by my grandfather many years ago. None of my family has used it in over two centuries.' Her face took on a look of confidence and pride. 'But I will use it. Let the others pick amidst the sickly creatures that slink past the watch towers. I shall do my hunting here, where true monsters prowl!'


Malador and Tylath looked at one another, for once both of the apprentices sharing the same thoughts. That they should be the lucky ones to accompany Belithi on this excursion into a place no dark elf had set eyes upon in centuries, that they should be the ones chosen to bolster Belithi's pride by capturing some beast to impress even the most arrogant in Karond Kar. Both of the students silently considered the recklessness of their instructor, both sullenly reflected upon how

she continued to drag out this final aspect of their training. It should have been such a simple thing, use the mantichore that had been given to them to subdue and capture some equally fearsome creature to replace it in Belithi's menagerie. Instead, Belithi had made the simple task into a long and arduous quest, a journey into lands uncertain and unknown.

'Mistress,' Uneldir said, stepping forward and averting his eyes from those of Belithi in the ritual sign of subservience and respect. 'It appears that the lodge is not uninhabited.' Uneldir pointed a gloved hand at the structure, denoting a pile of freshly chopped firewood lying beneath one of the slanting awnings that fringed the sloping roof.

'My grandfather left a caretaker here,' Belithi mused. 'Perhaps he is still alive.' The woman turned, gesturing with her slender hand for the group to advance. 'Whoever is living here, the lodge is mine.' The cruel smile spread her pale lips. 'I rather hope that whoever they are they try to contest that point. I haven't heard anything scream in days.'



 DRY, MUSTY smell billowed out from the darkness as Nithrind quietly opened the heavy timber door of the lodge. The scout slipped into the darkness, a long dagger gripped in his gloved hand. Some distance away, Belithi and her party watched impassively as the slave inspected the building. The other slave-scout, Uneldir, cast sullen, furtive glances at his mistress, bristling under this latest insult to his own skills. Belithi noticed Uneldir's angry stare. She smiled.

Nithrind appeared a few minutes later, his fingers making a complex series of motions, scout signals that indicated he had found nothing but that they should proceed with caution. Belithi waved her followers forward, arrogantly striding down the slope towards the squat structure. Let the scout advise caution all he liked, there was nothing in this blighted place that she had to fear. Whatever thought to confront Belithi of Karond Kar would live only long enough to regret its stupidity.

Up close, more details of the lodge became evident, the jagged rune-script of Naggaroth etched and carved into many of the timbers,

the small dangling strings of beads and feathers, the animal skulls that had been nailed into place along the edge of the roof. It was a primitive, savage looking structure, and Tylath wrinkled his nose in distaste as he strode towards it, inwardly sighing as he considered this new indignity he would have to endure. At least he would soon be free from all of it. From Belithi and her cruel whims, from the lowly Malador to whom his fate had been shackled, most of all from the ill-tempered, foul smelling brute that lumbered behind the chain he held. Soon it would all be over, Tylath would be a beastmaster and then he could put his family's influence to some new pursuit. Perhaps he would tithe a generous amount to the Temple of Khaine and pay Belithi and Malador back for all the indignities he had suffered. That thought warmed the dark corridors of Tylath's heart.

Malador brought Tylath out of his thoughts, placing a cold hand on his fellow apprentice's shoulder. Tylath looked down his knife-like nose at the other elf as Malador handed Tylath his length of chain, placing both of the heavy steel leashes attached to the mantichore's collar in the highborn apprentice's hands. The mantichore itself growled as it saw the exchange, rearing its head backward as if to test its leash. Tylath spat a curse at the monster and the motion instantly ceased, the mantichore lowering its head in an almost frightened gesture of submission.

Malador unslung the heavy steel device that he carried on his back. It was a great circle of black metal, cruel teeth jutting along its inner surface. The dark elf set the heavy contraption down upon the frozen ground, removing two massive steel spikes from his belt along with a small hammer. Malador drove one spike through a loop on either end of the circular trap, making it fast to the ground. Then the elf stepped away. He looked up at the mantichore, snarling a word of command to the huge leonine creature and stabbing a finger at the round trap. The mantichore did not hesitate but obediently stepped forward, placing one of its scarred feet into the centre of the device. As it did so, the steel jaws sprung shut, the metal teeth digging into the beast's flesh. The mantichore groaned in pain, a deep and piteous sound that pleased its masters greatly. That their creature should willingly and without hesitation put its paw into the cruel trap was

one of the primary tests of a beastmaster, that their creature should fear the pain its masters could visit upon it more than the pain it knew would result from doing as it was told.

Tylath arrogantly tossed Malador's length of chain back to him. Both elves then set about driving spikes into the ends of the chain, pinning the links to the ground on either side of the manticore, forcing its head into a low, uncomfortable position as they eliminated the slack. Satisfied that their beast had been made secure, the two apprentices turned back toward the lodge. Belithi stood before the door, hands poised on her hips.

'You should have been able to fetter your animal in half the time,' the beastmistress said. 'Perhaps I should reconsider my evaluation of your fitness.' Belithi turned her back to her two apprentices and waited while Nithrind opened the lodge door for her. Tylath and Malador cast contemptuous looks at their instructor's back. They knew that they would never hear a word of praise from their teacher, and her threats that she would label them as failures had ceased to have the same effect on them months ago. They also knew that Belithi would very soon have no further hold on them. A few days at most, and they would be free from the woman's high-handed scorn. The pupils of Belithi were the very best, and both of her apprentices knew that their skills would be in great demand, however much their teacher chose to taunt and insult them.



**T**HE INTERIOR OF the lodge was as black as the souls of those who had built it. Belithi snarled at Uneldir as the beastmistress stepped into the structure. The slave reached into a small pouch set on his belt and withdrew a small copper rod and a colourless crystal. Uneldir handed the two objects to Belithi. The dark elf did not even glance at her slave but set about fastening the crystal to the copper rod. As the translucent mineral slipped into place at the tip of the rune-encrusted rod, a dim grey light began to emanate from the crystal, banishing the darkness and revealing the details of the room.

It was small, perhaps only four or five hundred square feet. Heavy wooden planks had been laid down as a floor over which were strewn a wide variety of animal skin

rugs. The walls were similarly adorned, sporting skins stretched and nailed and a wide number of slowly rotting animal heads, the preservative spells and techniques employed upon the old forgotten trophies beginning to fade after so many centuries of neglect. One wall, however, was barren of such trophies, given over entirely to the large upright wooden pole that stood before it. A large fire pit dominated the centre of the room, smooth round stones surrounding the blackened depression in the floor. A few wooden couches were clustered about in a half-circle near the fire pit, their surfaces covered by shaggy pelts and the crude quilts of the primitive human tribes that had once been numerous in the land of Naggarth. Other furnishings were few, limited to a few chairs and tables, a large weapons rack set between two preserved bison heads against one wall, and a pair of once elegant cabinets, their gilded panels now dull and tarnished by age.

'Not so very much to look at, is it?' observed Tylath as he followed Belithi into the room. Malador followed after his fellow student. Behind them came Uneldir, leading the suddenly apprehensive dogs into the cave-like chamber. 'If someone has been living here, they must not be able to smell,' Tylath added.

'Could perhaps be humans,' Nithrind offered, stepping away from a mouldering cougar skin he had been inspecting. 'Some of their tribes consume herbs that will deaden their sense, make them better warriors. More immune to pain.'

'If I want to hear you speak, slave, I will tell you what I want to hear,' Belithi chastened the scout, her voice chill and threatening. Nithrind dutifully bowed his head in the token gesture of apology and shame. The beastmistress stabbed a finger at the fire pit. 'Uneldir, make a fire. The gloom here stifles my spirits.' Uneldir stared at Belithi for a moment, wondering at her strange words. Was it possible that even she was aware of the menacing air that hung about this place? Once again, the scout considered the dogs and their unease. The three brutes had slunk towards one of the couches, and were lying beneath it in a wide-eyed line, their ears perked for any trace of sound.

The scout did not delay long, and quickly made his way to the fire pit. He was somewhat surprised to see a small pile of wood already laid out within the stone circle,

but then recalled Nithrind's assertion that the lodge had been at least until recently inhabited. Uneldir reached into another of the pouches on his belt, producing a flint knife and a small length of granite. Freeborn dark elves might have a firegem, a faceted stone that would produce flame simply by being placed against a piece of kindling for a few moments. But a slave was fortunate indeed to be allowed to carry even the crudest means of making fire, and terrible was his punishment if he employed them without being told.

As the flames quickly rose, the lingering shadows in the lodgeroom dissipated, dancing off into the dark corners where the light would not reach. Belithi separated the two components of her wand, causing the eerie grey light to vanish. Uneldir kept his eyes on the fire, ensuring himself that it would not die. As he looked up, however, the scout scrambled back, his knife seeming to leap into his hand. The other dark elves instantly noted Uneldir's alarm and their own weapons were drawn in the blinking of an eye. From underneath the couch, the dogs gave half-hearted growls.

The firelight revealed a figure seated in one of the chairs facing the fire. So still had he been, so perfectly merged with his high-backed seat, that he had been completely invisible in the near perfect dark, even the keen vision of Nithrind had passed over him without taking notice. He was a scraggly apparition, his lean frame garbed in the dull tan of buckskins, his long white hair adorned with beads and a single feather, a feather that seemed to dance and pulse with colour as the firelight washed it. His pale hands were folded upon his lap, the eyes in his snow-white face were closed. Belithi and her followers experience a brief moment of uncertainty, trying to decide what to make of the strange ghostly figure. And in that brief moment, the apparition spoke.

'For what do you hunt, my lords of earth and sea?' The apparition's voice was musical and harsh, soft yet abrasive. It was the voice of a child of Naggaroth. The eyes of the ancient elf opened and he stared at his visitors. As he did so, his hair fell away from his throat, revealing for an instant the heavy metal collar fastened about his neck. Belithi and her students visibly relaxed as they saw the familiar and comforting appearance of the slave collar. Clearly this was the caretaker Belithi's grandfather had left behind.

'Is it a slave's place to ask questions of his masters?' Belithi spat. 'Perhaps you have forgotten that your only purpose is to please your owner?' Belithi shot a cruel, withering look at Nithrind. The shade would pay dearly for having overlooked the presence of the caretaker when he had scouted the lodge.

'I have not forgotten,' the elf said. 'I have had little else to occupy my mind since my master left me here so long ago. It is strange that I find comfort to know that I was not forgotten in Karond Kar.' The elf leaned forward, allowing the firelight to shine fully upon his face, revealing the old grey scars that lined his checks, the savage bite-mark that puckered his chin. 'I would serve my masters, as once I did. And I can serve best by telling you to seek your prey elsewhere. You will not find great trophies here, only death.'

'We look for death, white-hair,' Tylath boasted. 'For we are better than death and will take it back to Karond Kar in chains.'

The caretaker chuckled softly, sinking back into his chair. 'When you leave this place, I hope that you can recall such words of pride and foolishness. Because death will find you if you linger here.'

'You have already earned yourself a flogging for your insolence,' Belithi warned the ancient elf. 'I may forgive it as a result of your long isolation. Provided you do not displease me.' The beastmistress took several steps toward the seated caretaker, her whip coiled about her fist. 'What is this danger of which you speak?' she demanded.

The ancient elf extended his lean hands, gesturing all around him. Belithi followed his gesture, keeping one eye fixed on the caretaker as she did so. 'It is everything,' he told her. 'The danger is in everything here, it is too vast to escape, too big to find. Go back, go back to Karond Kar. Go back before it finds you.'

'He speaks in riddles,' stated Malador, stepping toward the fire pit.

'His mind is rotten,' scoffed Tylath. 'Slit the bastard's throat so we can forget this nonsense!'

Belithi looked down into the caretaker's scarred face. 'Are you mad?' she asked, her voice rippling with menace.

'Oh yes,' the caretaker replied, betraying no apprehension in his tone. 'With what I have seen, with what I have heard, there is no one who would not go mad. But even the mad can still speak wisdom.'

'What wisdom, old one?' asked Malador. 'What is this death of which you speak, this danger that cannot be fought?'

'What I speak of is simply Death,' the ancient elf said, his voice dropping into a silky whisper, 'for those who knew of it dared not give it a name. There is power in names, power that is invoked every time a name is spoken. And some things can eat that power, snatch it from the sky as if it was a tiny bird. This thing is such a thing, and so they called it Death when they had need to speak of it.'

'Who? Who spoke of such foolishness, slave?' Tylath sneered.

'Those who walked these lands long before the Sundering, before they denied our king his rightful crown,' replied the caretaker. 'Many were their names: Redfoot and Tapach and Wontimok. They came here long ago in their tribes and their nations, journeying to these lands on their spirit walks. They understood that there was power here, power that could be taped by their shamans, but they also understood that such power would consume them if they linger. So they would journey here in the summer and honour the cold lords of the north, but they were always careful to be gone before the first snows. Before the hungry gods would grow restless.'

'Do you have any idea what this idiot is babbling about?' Belithi asked, staring across at Nithrind. The elf scout was examining the massive log pole at the far end of the lodge. The slave looked back at his mistress, rising from his examination.

'The Redfoot and Tapach were skraelings, human barbarians that once dwelled in the Black Forests and Granite Hills before they were subdued by our armies,' the scout replied. 'Clearly, some of them made their way this far. This,' he gestured at the carved pole beside him, 'is their handiwork, one of their sacred totems. Perhaps the old fool isn't quite as alone as we imagined.'

Belithi turned over her slave's observations. If it was true, if there really were remnants of the long vanquished peoples here, this place might prove a very profitable region. The older dark elves were forever seeking ways to recapture the past. Slaves from races they thought long extinguished would certainly appeal to their twisted nostalgia.

'Yes, it was from the skraelings that I learned of the Walker,' the ancient elf nodded his head. 'I was visited by their spirits and

they told me of the power and how I could protect myself by honouring it. I carved that totem, just as they taught me and I was spared. But it is too late in the year now, the snow has fallen and the Death has become the Walker.'

'And just what is this Walker?' Belithi snarled. The ancient elf's veiled suggestions and mad warnings were becoming unnerving even to her and for one who regularly stared down hydras, fear was as unconscionable as it was uncommon. 'What is this thing you would have us run from?'

The caretaker stood, his face falling into the flickering shadows. 'It is everything and nothing,' he said, his voice filled with awe. 'It is the grey in the leaf and the black in the snow. It is the colour of wind and the sound of dark. It does not see in the places we see, it does not walk the paths our feet can find. Only when it is hungry, only when the snow has fallen and the world is dead does it stir, does it descend into the places we know. Even then, it is too terrible for our minds to contain. It is bigger than the horizon, taller than the sky. It can break down the mountain with its roar and freeze the sea with its shadow. It is all around us, even now. I have seen it many times, in many shapes.' The caretaker looked up at Belithi, fixing her with his strange, tired eyes. 'How will you see it, I wonder? Will you see it before the Walker reaches down to devour you? I carved what I saw upon the totem, that is how I honoured the Death. How will it allow you to show it honour?'

Belithi did not hesitate but brought her palm smashing into the caretaker's face, stabbing his nose upward into his brain. There was a spurt of blood and the sound of crunching cartilage. The elf fell without a sound, his body crumpling to the floor. Belithi spat on the corpse. 'Die knowing that you are trash, an insult to the blood of the Druchii!' The beastmistress kicked the corpse, then turned toward Uneldir. 'Carve that animal. We will use it as bait on the morrow!' She turned her imperious gaze on the other elves.

'Forget what the old fool said!' she told them. 'He was driven mad by all the years alone, so that he imagined some spirit in the air around him, something to relieve him of his solitude. Give his lies no further thought. On the morrow we will hunt and you will complete your training.'



Belithi said nothing more, but set about making a bed for herself on the most spacious of the couches. Tylath and Malador selected their own beds once their instructor was settled. Though there were plenty of couches, the two slave scouts would sleep on the floor, as befitted their lowly station. Uneldir made himself a place beside his dogs, using the warmth of the animals to fight off the chill of the floor.

Nithrind found himself a place near the wall, facing the tall totem. He had heard everything the old caretaker had said. He had heard that the ancient elf had carved the totem himself, had placed upon it the many shapes he had seen his mysterious entity wear when he had seen it. Nithrind saw many shapes in the totem, massively fanged ogre-like faces, the snouted visages of bears, the curved beak of some mighty bird. There were dozens of vastly different forms represented on the totem, each apparently carved after it had been seen. What disturbed the shade most was the fact that the totem was completely carved; there was no more room for the old caretaker to have placed a new image. The last image was what made that fact so unsettling to Nithrind, for it was a perfect representation of an elfen face. It was the face of the old caretaker.



**M**ALADOR AWOKE, gasping for breath. The dark elf lifted his hand to his forehead, finding it damp with sweat. His eyes ranged across the darkness of the room, his ears strained for the slightest hint of sound. He could see his fellow elves, Belithi and Tylath asleep on their couches, Nithrind lying with his back against the wall, Uneldir beneath one of the vacant couches, his dogs lying all around him. The animals twitched in their sleep, legs sometimes kicking out, soft whimpers rising from them.

Malador tried not to think of what might be disturbing the animals' dreams, tried not to consider that which had disturbed his own. He had imagined a shape, a figure, vast and huge, looming down out of the night sky, leaning over the lodge. Malador felt helpless and small, the pride and arrogance in his veins withering. Even now, awake, he could sense that imposing presence, sense it looming down upon him. Malador trembled, fear welling up within him. It was an emotion no Druchii would display openly, for fear was

weakness and to show weakness to another was to invite doom. Yet such was the terror that had come upon him, that even an entire life spent controlling and hiding fear was not enough to fight down the staggering horror that crawled through Malador's veins.

The elf pulled the heavy fur covers a bit tighter about his body, trying to hide the shaking in his limbs. He stared up at the ceiling, wondering if more than the stars and moons stared back. Outside, the only sound was the groaning of the wind. Listening to the low moan of the night, Malador eventually drifted back into slumber.



HERE IN THE name of all the hells is "it?" roared Tylath, his breath icy with the morning frost.

'I certainly hope that you can find an answer to that question,' purred Belithi from the doorway of the lodge. There was no mistaking the cruel pleasure on her face. 'Because if you do not find an answer, then you will have proven yourself unfit to bear the title of beastmaster, or any other rank of worth.'

Malador kneeled beside the bloody path of snow, staring down at the heavy steel-jawed trap and the gory object held firmly within it. They had used the trap to restrain their manticore countless times throughout their training. Not once had the beast shown the strength or drive to escape. Now, so close to their final test, the monster had done the impossible. He looked over to where the twisted spikes that had fixed the manticore's leashes to the earth had been ripped from the ground.

'He must have gnawed through his own foot,' Malador commented, his hand reaching out toward the bloody paw still fixed to the trap. 'What could have frightened a manticore so much that it would do such a thing?'

'Does it matter?' snarled Belithi. 'A beastmaster's creatures must fear nothing more than its master, not even death, not even Khaine!' The woman gestured at the paw. 'That tells me you have failed. Now you should pray that you can find your escaped creature and try to regain some dignity.'

The elf scout Nithrind was walking in a wide circle around the area, looking for any sign of the manticore's trail. It was doubtful

that there would be much to find, the beast most likely chose to fly rather than walk after leaving one of its paws in the trap.

'There is no blood,' stated the slave, his face bearing a perplexed expression. 'This area should be covered in blood. But there isn't any.' The other elves turned their gaze once more to the trap. So fixated had they been upon the fact of the manticore's escape and the gruesome extremity left behind that none had noticed the snow. It was soft and white, unmarked and virgin.

'It must have snowed during the night,' observed Tylath. 'After the beast made its escape.'

Nithrind shook his head. 'If that is so, then why is there no snow on the trap, or on the paw?' He pointed at the paw, drawing attention to the jagged tear. 'This was not bitten off. It was ripped apart.'

'Are you saying that the caretaker's Walker reached down and picked the animal up?' scoffed Belithi, her voice incredulous. Before Nithrind could answer, Uneldir emerged from the lodge.

'The body,' the scout said. 'It is gone!'

Belithi spun about, her hand raking Uneldir's face. The slave fell back, diverting his eyes downward in a gesture of apology. 'What do you mean, the caretaker's body is gone?'

'I went to chop it into bait, mistress, but it was not there!' Uneldir repeated. Belithi considered his words for a moment, then laughed.

'There, we have the answer to your mystery Nithrind,' she said. 'The old madman wasn't alone after all. There must be skraelings about, I am certain of it now. They must have freed the manticore and taken away the old fool's body while we slept.'

'They must be skilled indeed to not have awoken any of us,' stated Nithrind, not convinced for a moment by Belithi's logic.

'We know for certain that they are here now,' Belithi said, glaring at the scout. 'They won't surprise us a second time. We'll remind them of their place soon enough. But first we should see if we can't recover the beast and let these two young idiots try to redeem themselves.'

The beastmistress pointed her slender hand at the darkened doorway of the lodge. 'Prepare the bait. There can't be too much game about, so we will see if we can't coax the beast back with some fresh meat.'

Uneldir smiled, starting to move toward the door, but Belithi snapped her fingers, directing him to remain. 'I think it best that someone else attends to things. You've failed me enough for one morning.' Nithrind dutifully drew his knife and disappeared into the lodge. Belithi noted Uneldir's angry glare as the other slave walked past, smiling as she saw the desired reaction manifest itself.



THE SUN WAS still low in the sky as the dark elves made their way into the forest. Nithrind led the way, looking for any sign in the soft snow. Belithi and her two apprentices followed after him. Belithi held a long spear in her hands while both of her apprentices carried repeating crossbows favoured by their race. Last of all came Uneldir, struggling under the weight of the butchered dog meat slung over his back.

Malador found his gaze drifting upwards every time his thoughts strayed. Whatever his subconscious mind thought to find in the sky, all he could see were the snow-covered branches of the pine trees, gently swaying as the cold wind crawled past them.

Suddenly, Nithrind stopped, lifting his hand. He gestured for the other hunters to draw forward. He pointed at the pug marks he had found. There were only three tracks, each massive. The fore-print was deeper than the two rear prints.

'Looks like our wayward beast did not go so very far,' commented Tylath smugly.

'Which is quite fortunate for you,' Belithi spoke in a menacing hiss. 'It looks as though the tracks lead off in that direction,' she pointed towards a distant snow drift. As she did so, a large shape leaped atop the icy obstruction.

It was at least ten feet from snout to haunch, with another four feet of bristly tail swaying behind it. The pelt was grey and marked with deep black stripes. The leonine head was fixed to a short, bull-like neck framed by powerful shoulders. Huge eight-inch fangs hung from the animal's upper jaw. The ice-tiger, more commonly called the sabre-tooth, one of the most rare of all the creatures of the north. Even the jaded tastes of the Druchii considered such a creature a valuable prize, its flesh was an exotic delicacy relished by the highest of the nobility, its pelt and fangs just as valuable. Suddenly, the

escaped mantichore vanished from Tylath's thoughts.

Tylath lifted his crossbow and fired five shots in rapid succession. The tiger fell from the snow drift, disappearing behind the mound. Tylath kept his weapon at the ready and began to stalk toward the drift. 'Still think I am unfit?' he sneered as he advanced.

'My hunt, my kill,' declared Belithi. 'No matter who kills it, the kill belongs to me.'

Tylath swiped his hand through the air, as if waving aside his instructor's words. 'My mother may have something to say about that when we get back to Karond Kar,' he said, his voice swelling with arrogance. Let the beastmistress just try to take his kill away from him. She would quickly learn her place.

The elves rounded the drift. Tylath stared in open-mouthed shock at what he saw.

'But I hit it!' he shouted. 'At least four times! It fell!' He ran his hand through the unblemished snow, then pounded his fist against the icy ground.

'A poor beastmaster, an even poorer shot with a crossbow,' Belithi said, her voice a mocking hiss. 'Your mother must truly be proud of you.' Tylath spun on his instructor, his hand dropping to the hilt of his dagger. Malador tensed as he saw the murderous intent burning in the highborn's eyes, knowing that his own fate was tied with that of Tylath. If he was killed, any chance for Malador's success would vanish. If he killed Belithi, matters would be even worse, for they would both be held responsible, both marked for death in the torture theatres of Karond Kar.

Belithi simply smiled at her apprentice, utterly unconcerned. 'If you truly think you are better with that knife than you are with your aim, draw it. I care not whose whelp you are, I'll add your scalp and your spleen to my trophy wall.' Tylath glared at the arrogant beastmistress, his face twisting into a snarl. 'Do it, or don't, but at least have the stomach to make a choice.'

Tylath balled his fist, letting his hand fall away from the dagger and stalked off. Malador breathed a sigh of relief as he saw the other apprentice leave. He might be completely disgraced, but at least he was alive. And as long as he was, there was still a chance, however small, that Malador might succeed and survive.

'Mistress!' called the slave scout Nithrind after the situation with Tylath had resolved itself. The scout pointed to several objects lying in the snow. They were crossbow bolts, each one standing upright, forming a perfect line. Belithi crouched beside the missiles, staring at the strange, unnatural formation. 'There is also this,' the slave said, gesturing toward the top of the snow bank. The snow was smooth and unmarked.

'But we all saw the tiger,' Malador protested, as though by stating the fact the pug marks of the huge cat would suddenly appear.

'Native magic,' cursed Belithi as she rose from the ground. 'Obviously these skraelings have one of their filthy shamans with them, trying to deceive us with their magic tricks.' Her hand whitened as it closed tighter about the length of her spear. 'But we won't let them. We'll show them the folly of toying with the Druchii.'

Such was the venom in her voice, that Malador was almost reassured by Belithi's words. Then Tylath's scream echoed through the forest.



**T**HERE WAS BLOOD on the snow, and bones, and brains. Bits of flesh scattered about like a gory litter, strewn about for yards. Even in the pits of Karond Kar, Belithi had never seen such carnage visited upon a body. Some of the pieces were all the more horrible for their readily identifiable nature, a scrap of skull with a slender ear, a finger. Other pieces looked as though they had been turned inside out by some impossible means. Nithrind shook his head in amazement, at a loss to even consider what sort of creature could have worked such horror upon Tylath in so short a space of time.

Uneldir watched as the others strode toward the refuse that had once been Tylath. He was not concerned with the apprentice's death, unless he could somehow turn it to his advantage. If he could perhaps find out what had done this to the elf, track it down and kill it, he might at last outshine Nithrind, at last force Belithi to acknowledge his skill and ability.

As these thoughts turned over in Uneldir's mind, he looked away from the carnage. As he did so, he caught sight of a figure standing amidst the trees. It was a scraggly looking

form, its skin dark and crimson, its clothing made of fur and buckskin. The scout at once dropped the heavy burden of dog meat and drew his blade. The skraeling had lingered too long at the scene of the crime. Now Uneldir would see to it that the human paid the price for his foolishness.



**M**ALADOR'S MIND reeled as he stared down at a piece of Tylath's face. He was doomed now; there was no chance of succeeding with his partner dead. He would be marked as a failure and a quick death back in Karond Kar would be the most merciful fate he could expect. It seemed so cruel, to be damned because of another's misfortune. Perhaps that was why the tradition had been established so long ago. Briefly, Malador wondered if he might not simply escape, flee into exile. He shook his head. He had seen what isolation had done to the caretaker, how it had rotted his mind and sanity. He would not let himself sink to such depths, it was better to die with some measure of courage and honour, to show some defiance to those who consigned him to his fate.

The excited shout of Uneldir brought Malador from his thoughts. The student spun around, watching as the slave sprinted toward the trees. What was he doing? Was the slave thinking to escape from Belithi? Then Malador stared into the trees. The elf gasped in horror, taking several steps backward, his limbs once again trembling. There had been something in the trees, something huge and hairy and monstrous.

'Where is that idiot going?' Belithi swore. Malador looked over at his teacher. She hadn't seen the figure among the trees. Malador looked back, but there was nothing to be seen, only Uneldir disappearing among the pines. The beastmistress called out for her slave to return, but from Uneldir there was no answer.



**U**NELDIR COULD hear Belithi calling to him, but he paid her no heed. Let the hag try to send Nithrind now! It would be Uneldir not the shade who would find the skraeling. It would be Uneldir's knife, not Nithrind's that opened the animal's belly.

Even Belithi would have no choice but to acknowledge that fact.

The scout raced through the trees, his long strides carrying him far quicker and more nimbly than even the fastest human. Yet, despite his great speed and agility, as he raced through the maze of trees, he seemed unable to close the gap between himself and his prey. He would catch only fleeting glimpses of the skraeling as the buckskin-clad man would round a tree or disappear behind a bush. It was an unsettling feeling, as if the scout was pursuing a shadow, not something of flesh and blood. Yet every time he hesitated, every time doubt entered his mind, he would once more see his quarry up ahead and redouble his efforts to overtake him.

After what seemed like hours of racing through the labyrinth of pine trees, Uneldir emerged into a small clearing. The elf hesitated, suddenly overwhelmed by some nameless dread. There was something wrong here. Uneldir turned around, staring back the way he had come, not liking the darkness that lingered beneath the snow-laden trees. As he turned once more to regard the clearing, he was stunned to find that it had changed. Mouldering old stones had appeared, covered by a growth of brightly flowered vines. Uneldir cringed away from the stones, horrified by the unnatural way in which the delicate vines were flourishing amidst the ice and snow. As he watched, the stones themselves began to writhe and change. Faces seemed to be floating within the rock, straining to push themselves through the stone, the faces of animals and humans and elves, all screaming in agony and torment. Uneldir turned to flee the hideous vision, but as he did so, he found that the forest itself had disappeared.

A vast mound of rocks had replaced the trees, hoary old stones pitted by wind and rain. Crouched atop the stones was a monstrous shape, its multi-faceted eyes staring coldly down at the terrified elf. Uneldir gave voice to a scream that welled up from the bottom of his blackened soul, turning to flee from this new horror. As he did so, he found his path blocked by a new figure, that of a small skraeling child, her dark hair tied behind her head, her buckskin tunic adorned with bright beads.

The girl smiled up at the terrified elf, and as she did so, her face melted off her skull. The death's head continued to smile.

'This is how you die,' it told Uneldir.



**D** ID YOU SEE it?' gasped Malador in a subdued voice. Belithi cast a look of scorn at her pupil.

'I saw that fool rush off into the woods, nothing more,' she told him, her voice filled with contempt.

'There was something in the woods, something beckoning to me,' explained Malador. He was no longer frightened of Belithi, he had discovered something that held more terror for him than his cruel instructor.

'Do you know what this idiot is speaking of?' snapped Belithi, directing her imperious gaze at Nithrind. The scout was examining the ground. He rose and shook his head.

'The only tracks here are Uneldir's,' Nithrind stated.

The ominous silence was suddenly broken by a loud wail, a terrible high-pitched scream that slowly dropped into a low, bestial grunt. It was a sound of menace and challenge, a sound of warning and threat. It was a sound that promised death and things worse than death. All of the elves stared at the forest around them with new eyes, eyes that were wide with open apprehension as all the fears that had been brooding within each of them rose to the surface and escaped their control. Suddenly, none of them was able to deny the dread that had been stalking them for so many days, the aura of malignant oppression that had been preying upon their minds.

Belithi was the first to compose herself. Her hands clenched into fists at her sides until the nails drew blood from her palms. She was Druchii, her kin were the rightful masters of the world. There was nothing that was beyond the ability of her people to overcome and destroy at their leisure. Certainly she would not run from filthy primitive humans, creatures who were born only to feel the studded lash of the dark elves upon their backs. Whatever crude sorceries these savages had accidentally stumbled upon, they would not prevail. She was Belithi of Karond Kar. She was Druchii and no beast born beneath the sun would better her, would send her back to her city in failure and shame.

The beastmistress faced her fear-struck followers. The elf withdrew the heavy lash coiled at her waist, gesturing with it meaningfully at Nithrind.

'I will not allow this skraeling vermin to steal my property,' she declared in a voice of chill iron. 'We will track down Uneldir and then reward these animals for their effrontery.' The scout's face was somewhat dubious as he considered his mistress's calm statement, but he seemed to be emboldened by it just the same. Malador continued to gaze at the trees, his eyes darting from every shadow and branch. Belithi strode towards him.

'I said that we are going to find my slave,' she hissed in a low voice.

'There is death out there,' Malador said fearfully.

'There is death right here,' Belithi snarled, pushing Malador's chin upward with the sharp, cruel point of her spear. 'I'll allow you the choice of where you find death.' Malador swallowed the breath caught in his throat, gesturing his submission to the beastmistress with his hands.

As Belithi stepped away from her subdued student, the wail echoed through the trees once more. Each of the elves heard its sinister, menacing vibrations as they crawled amidst the boles, as they faded into the deep-throated bellowing grunt. The elves noted the direction of the sound and sprinted toward it, determined to seek out the source of this dread that had shadowed them, this horror that had stalked them through the wilds.

With their fleet-footed stride, the elves were soon deep within the trees, chasing after the lingering echoes of the strange and terrible cry. Each was certain of the path he took.

None of them noticed that each of his fellows had raced off in an entirely different direction.



**N** ITHRIND PAUSED, not from fatigue, but to take in his surroundings. He stared at the snow-covered rocks and the twisted pines that surrounded him, his keen mind at once selecting peculiarities in each then committing them to his trap-like memory. This was how the Shadow Brotherhood taught its shades to navigate in



the wilds, developing a map within their minds, a map far more extensive and intimate than any drawn upon parchment. The scout swiftly noted a boulder that resembled a sleeping cold one, a tree whose trunk seemed to have a crude resemblance to one of the spindly towers of Karond Kar and another that had a long branch jutting out low from its trunk, presented like the lance of a knight. His landmarks selected, the scout raced on.

There was no real anticipation of any victory in Nithrind's mind as he sprinted between the trees. He did not know what manner of foe it was that they faced, nor did he possess his mistress's prideful arrogance in the supremacy of their kind. He'd seen things long ago, he was almost certain. Fleeting images from his old life, leading serpent-cloaked corsairs through the steaming green hell of the south only to fall prey to the awesome magics of the bloated priest-lords of the scaly beings that claimed such realms as their own. No, not every creature in the world had been created as the playthings of the Druchii. There were older and fouler things in the lost corners of the world than most dark elves would accept as actually existing, but exist they did. The dread Witch King Malekith had not erected the watch towers simply to mark the northern boundary of his domain.

There was only one reason Nithrind continued, one reason why he did as his mistress commanded. He was a hunter and this might be his final and greatest hunt. Shade against shadow, mortal against the old caretaker's mythical Walker. That was why he continued to stalk through the trees, to prove the level of his skill, even if only to himself.

Nithrind suddenly paused. Did he see a rock in the shape of a cold one? He looked again. There could be no question, it was indeed the stone he had seen before. Somehow, without knowing it, he had doubled back upon his own tracks. He turned to retrace his path and find where he had crossed his own tracks. As he did so, however, he again froze. The tree with the lance-like branch was standing behind him. But before it had been standing beside the cold one rock.

With a deep sense of unease, Nithrind turned once more, looking for the other tree. It was nowhere near the boulder, but was dozens of yards away. Somehow, impossibly, the objects seemed to have rearranged themselves, as though some giant had plucked them from where they had been and

then haphazardly set them down again. The scout's mind rejected the idea with something approaching stark terror. He turned and fled back the way he had come.

Nithrind emerged in a clearing, finding himself faced once again with his landmarks. This time, the cold one stone sat in front of the spear tree while the tower tree was looming on the opposite side of the path, exactly the opposite position in which he had seen it the first time. The scout's breath was hammering through his lungs, billowing from his nose in a cloud of frost as he turned once more, fleeing back down the path. Wherever he turned, however, he found the same landmarks, each time their relative positions inverted and jumbled from how he had last seen them.

The scout's limbs trembled with fright and weakness, his stomach churned in sickness. Something the elf had never experienced in his long centuries of life had fallen upon him like a cloak of cobwebs. He was lost. And as his mind crumbled before this impossible sensation, a new horror manifested itself.

The wind began to pick up, wailing through the trees, casting snow from the branches of the pines. Nithrind found himself glancing toward the direction from which this sudden gust had manifested itself. The dark elf retreated back as he saw something moaning through the trees. He had seen dust devils long ago in the wastes of the Red Desert, billowing pillars of wind and dirt. This was a kindred thing, only it was snow that was carried about within the spiral of wind. But the scout could feel that this was no caprice of nature, but something more, something with malevolent purpose about it.

Nithrind ran as the ice spiral crawled between the trees, ran as he had never run in all his long life. His feet barely lighted upon the ground before he sprang forward with his next step. Yet, for all his speed, whenever he glanced back, he could see that his intangible pursuer was closing upon him. Nithrind redoubled his efforts, running until he could feel his heart banging against his ribs, threatening to punch a hole through his chest. His lungs were on fire, his sides felt as if hot knives had been thrust through them. His legs were becoming heavy weights, defying his every effort to lift them. Yet still he ran.

At last, just as Nithrind felt that the unnatural debilitating fatigue wracking his form must overcome him, the scout looked

one last time over his shoulder. He almost laughed when he saw that the wind devil was no more, that the spiral of ice and snow no longer dogged his steps.

Then Nithrind felt the brutal stabbing pain rip through his belly. The elf stared in numb disbelief at the tall tree that he had run into. It was one that he had noted earlier, along with another tree that looked like a tower and a stone that looked like a cold one.

Nithrind's body sagged backwards upon the long lance-like branch upon which he had impaled himself. Bloody froth bubbled from the elf's mouth as he bent over backwards, his dead weight pulling him toward the ground. Then he tried to scream, but succeeded only in gurgling upon the blood filling his throat.

Spilling out of the trees, crawling across the snow in a slow, deliberate motion, was a spiral of ice and wind. Nithrind understood that death was coming for him, and in his last moments he understood that it would be colder and more cruel than any imagined by his black-hearted race.



**M**ALADOR PAUSED in his tracks. Had he heard a scream just then? The echoes of that terrible howl sounded within his mind. The elf's knuckles whitened about the grip of his blade as fear slithered through his blackened soul. Once more he could see that shape, that form standing silent amidst the trees, like some ghastly apparition. Uneldir had not seen it, nor any of the others, but Malador was certain that what his eyes had beheld was no illusion. It was out there, stalking him even now. Huge, like a tree itself, covered in lank black hair, its limbs long and thick as poles, muscles wound about them like anchor chain. That leering, bestial visage, its broad splayed nose, heavy brow and fanged, slavering mouth. The evil yellow eyes, gleaming with a malign intelligence, a mocking savagery. Malador found himself shuddering once more. He had seen it, he had seen the caretaker's Walker, the nameless Death of the skraelings.

The apprentice beastmaster had no sooner reached this conclusion than he became aware that he was no longer alone. It was not a sound, not a smell, not something he could see. Yet he could sense it all the same, like a filth clutching at his spirit. Malador turned around slowly, forcing his body to face what

he was certain now watched him from the labyrinthine expanse of the forest.

The trees were as they had been, silent, their branches weighted down by the winter snow, swaying slightly in the chill wind. The shadows hung heavy beneath them, yet not so greatly as to conceal that which Malador feared. The elf gasped a sigh of relief, wiping his hand at the cold sheen of terror that dotted his brow.

Then the trees began to moan, the branches began to part and the ground began to tremble. Malador's eyes widened as he saw the upper branches of the pines bend as though pushed aside by some mammoth shape, snapping back with great violence as the intruder passed them. He could see the snow explode as immense feet smashed into the frozen earth. A foul, animal stink reached out to his nose, filling him with its clinging stench. Yet there was nothing, no shape smashing its way through the trees. The last vestiges of control deserted Malador and the elf gave voice to a scream of mortal terror as he fled before the invisible titan.

Malador could feel the heavy, relentless tread of the monster as it pursued him, could feel its footfalls smashing into the ground, causing the earth itself to tremble. He could hear the branches as they were pushed aside and then snapped back into place. The animal stink filled his lungs, the hot breath of the thing wafted across his neck. Malador cringed as he imagined curved bestial fangs sinking into his neck, ripping away his life, leaving him to bleed out in the snow like an animal. He imagined what Tylath had endured in those moments before he died. It was enough to horrify even one born into the cruel culture of Naggaroth.

The elf had no thought for direction, no care for keeping his bearings. There was only one thought in his mind, a desperate need to escape, to gain enough distance on his enemy that he might slit his own belly and cheat it of its victory. It was the only act of defiance and denial that Malador could think of, the only hope that could find a stronghold in his hammering, pulsating heart.

Then, abruptly, the sounds stopped. So sudden and complete was the silence that even the sure-footed elf stumbled and fell, his senses stunned. Malador swiftly picked himself up, daring to look back at the invisible thing that pursued him.

'You disgrace your blood,' a voice filled with contempt snarled at him. Malador looked over his shoulder, feeling an intense relief as he saw Belithi standing beside a tree, her spear gripped in one hand, her whip in the other.

'It chased me through the woods,' Malador said as he caught his breath, trying desperately to subdue the fear in his tones.

'What chased you?' the beastmistress demanded. 'I see nothing!'

'It could not be seen, but it was there!' protested her student. 'It was enormous! I was certain that it was going to kill me!'

'You may wish your phantom had killed you if I hear another word of this nonsense!' spat Belithi. 'Are you so weak willed that these little tricks of sorcery can so unman you? And you had the presumption to study under me?' The elf shook her head, the sleek black locks whipping about her.

'Come, I've found where they are,' Belithi said, gesturing with the length of her spear. 'It is time we ended this.'

'You found the skraelings?' Malador asked, unable to contain his shocked disbelief. Had it really been skraelings all along? Had all the things he had seen been frightened visions conjured up by some primitive human shaman?

'Come along,' Belithi told him. She cast an imperious look at him. 'They were so certain of themselves, but I have shown them how wrong they were.'

Belithi led Malador through the trees, past stands of warped, twisted pines, their trunks blackened by lightning and flame, past old standing stones, their surfaces pitted with the faintest traces of ancient runes. Black caves yawned from the side of a massive mountain, watching the two progress with their empty eyes.

At last, they stood within a clearing. Malador gazed at the snow-heavy trees surrounding the open space, at once likening them to the bars of a cage. The clutch of fear was heavy on him now, his soul felt as if it was drowning in the clinging aura of timeless evil that hung in the air all about him.

Then he saw it, the body of Nithrind, impaled upon the branch of a tree, his flesh blasted from his bones, only his intact vestment betraying his identity. Then he saw Uneldir, sitting upon the snow, almost

as though he was resting. Except for the fact that there was nothing above his neck except a grinning skull. The bloody litter of Tylath, Malador now saw, had been transported here and was strewn all about the clearing. Even the manticore was here, its body seemingly turned inside out.

The final corpse was smashed deep into the ground, looking for all the world like an insect crushed beneath a boot. The slender limbs dangled brokenly from the jagged crater that held the pulpy mess of the body. Belithi's face stared into the cloudy sky, the look upon it neither so proud nor so arrogant as it had been in life.

'Existence is like a stream in motion,' the figure standing behind Malador said in a voice that was as soft as thunder and as harsh as silk. 'It ripples and twists and bubbles and babbles. It is everything and it is nothing. Within that stream, there are hunters and there is prey. Can any mind ever truly know which role it is called upon to play in any given moment? Only foolish mortals are so certain that they know their place in the confusion that is everything and nothing.' The voice was at once both amused and perplexed by what it considered the paradox of ignorance. 'It is the foolish who think they understand. It is the wise who know that they never will.'

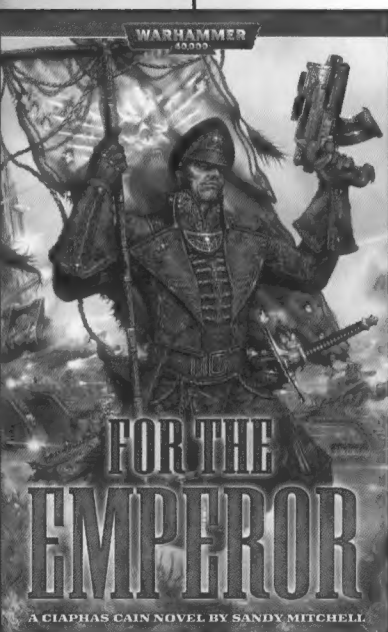
Malador turned toward the source of the terrible voice, the voice that was at once sweet and bestial. The shape was no longer so very much like Belithi now, for it had swelled to something of mammoth size, its face had twisted into a sharp beak of bone. Thousands of eyes had opened all about its form, of every shape and colour, as were the feathers that covered its wings. The entire shape seemed to glow with an every changing inner illumination.

'There is only one constant, even within Chaos,' the monster declared. It extended its hand, stabbing its finger at Malador. The elf did not have time to scream as his bones twisted, as his flesh swelled. New limbs grew and collapsed, extra mouths opened and screamed before bursting apart as they transformed into wet gleaming organs. The elf's body was gripped by a fit of uncontrolled metamorphosis and transformation, ripping itself apart even as it shifted between an idiot legion of forms and shapes.

'The only constant,' the daemon laughed as its body faded into the wind, 'is Change.' ○



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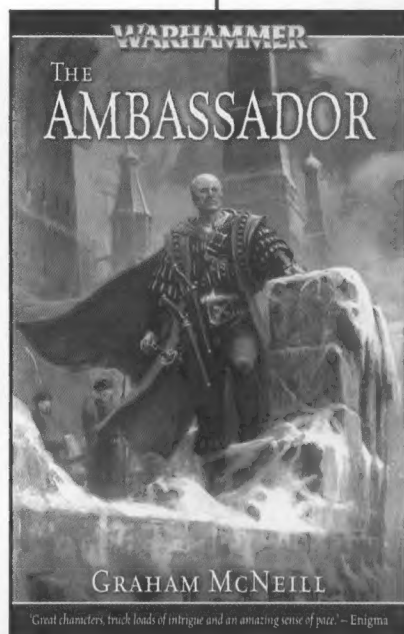
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• **THREADING THE TEETH by Dan Abnett**

Silvaro edged the *Rumour* around just a hint so that Sheerglas had his port guns at a tight present. They flashed and fired. Hull boards and gun-port hatches blew out into the water, and smoke laced the space between the two ships. Another thundering broadside came from the devil barque. The *Rumour's* foresails exploded into shreds and several men on deck were slaughtered. Sesto could smell blood again. Blood, sea salt, sea wind, powder smoke...

• **SECTOR THIRTEEN by Sandy Mitchell**

*I hit the pavement hard, heedless of the jolt that drove the breath from my lungs, relaxing to absorb the impact with the instinct hammered into me by years on the assault courses of the Schola Progenium, and turned, drawing my own laspistol. A moment later Wynetha hit the ground beside me, and I peppered the window above us with vindictive enthusiasm, blowing the head of a thickset male from his shoulders. As he fell, I noticed a third arm growing from his right shoulder, tipped with razor-sharp talons.*

• **TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT by Anthony Reynolds & John Stokes**

**THE TALE OF THE KNIGHT**

'A savage horde of beasts had emerged from the forest and was roaming the lands of Gisoreux, burning and slaying everything in its path.'

• **FOREVER LOYAL by Mitchel Scanlon**

*One of their weapons fired and a trooper died an ugly death, reduced to a flailing skeleton in the blink of an eye. Then, in a roar of obscene oaths and battle-cries, the Volgars charged forward to meet the advance with lasguns blazing. Paralysed by indecision, Drel found himself briefly alone at the eye of the storm as, all around him, fragile flesh and unyielding metal met in uneven confrontation. He saw a machine-warrior cut down a screaming trooper right in front of him and for an instant the killer paused, death's head turning first one way, then the next as it cast about for a new victim. To Drel's horror, he saw the creature turn its smouldering and soulless eyes to gaze his way.*

• **WIND OF CHANGE by C.L. Werner**

Spilling out of the trees, crawling across the snow in a slow, deliberate motion, was a spiral of ice and wind. Nithrind understood that death was coming for him, and in his last moments he understood that it would be colder and more cruel than any imagined by his black-hearted race.

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